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Gakuto
Mikumo

ILLUSTRATION BY
Manyako

STRIKE THE BLOOD

THE ETERNAL BANQUET







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THE ETERNAL BANQUET

Gakuto Mikumo
Illustration by Manyako



Kanon Kanase
Faux-Angel
The gentle Saint of Middle School

Kojou Akatsuki
The Fourth Primogenitor
The world's mightiest—and
laziest—vampire



Yukina Himeragi
Sword Shaman
The Lion King Agency's
beautiful observer

Asagi Aiba
Cyber Empress
Gorgeous, selfish
high school cyber genius



Nagisa Akatsuki

Sister of the Primogenitor
Innocent, blooming, boisterous,
and wise little sister

Motoki Yaze

Hyper Adapter
Cheerful classmate or
two-faced jester?

Yume Eguchi

Succubus
The young successor to the
Witch of the Night



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THE ETERNAL BANQUET

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GAKUTO MIKUMO

ILLUSTRATION BY
MANYAKO

YEN
PRESS
NEW YORK

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STRIKE THE BLOOD, Volume 19

GAKUTO MIKUMO

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INTRO

INTRO

The stench of death filled the underground passage. A woman held her silver long sword aloft, piercing the night sky.

It was a young woman in a dark blue suit jacket with a skirt. She had an old-fashioned sort of beauty and a balanced, graceful physique. She possessed an enchanting appearance that perfectly suited a fashion magazine.

Right now, however, her skin was marred by sweat and grime, and even her once neatly arranged hairstyle was all over the place.

The chest of her suit had a large gash in it, and her now-exposed left shoulder was drenched with fresh blood.

Countless pieces of wreckage were scattered in her vicinity, torn apart by a tremendous force. Monitors, digital devices, armor, small arms, and howitzers—all parts once comprising the destroyed robot tanks—were lying in a heap. Casualties lay on top. The bodies were endless.

The elite Attack Mage Unit, the pride of the Island Guard, had been defeated.

This was in Stratum One of Keystone Gate. In other words, she was inside the giant structure that served as Itogami Island's core.

Well past midnight, there was not a single civilian visible in that passage. As the woman glared ahead, all that she saw were uninvited guests—intruders.

The three of them wore ghoulish masks resembling skulls of demon beasts and white robes. They had destroyed over a dozen robot tanks and wounded numerous Attack Mages. Yet, there was nary a scratch or stain upon their robes.

The wounded woman was the only one left to face the intruders.

The tension in the air did not permit a single moment's respite. Both sides were ready to kill.

The few surviving armed Guardsmen watched the scene in apprehension.

Putting her ragged breathing in order, she quietly chanted an invocation. The tip of the silver long sword shifted toward the mask of the intruder walking at their fore.

Her form flickered, swaying soundlessly like a mirage.

She sprinted. Then, she leaped forward. Her body, reinforced by way of ritual power, charged at a speed surpassing human limits, her long sword lashing out to cut down her foe.

However, her slashing attack never touched the intruder's body.

With the unpleasant sounds of flesh ripping and bones snapping from an impact, she was the person knocked through the air.

Unable to even let out a scream, she collided with a wall, fresh blood scattering as she was rendered immobile.

The intruders in the white robes did not spare a glance for the woman lying in a pool of her own blood. To them, they had merely swatted aside an annoying fly.

"No...way..."

"A Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency...taken down just like that...?"

Distress spread among the living Guardsmen.

Top-rank Attack Mages, said to be experts in anti-demon combat, had suffered an utterly one-sided defeat. There was no way for them to deny that. The despairing gap in power between them and the intruders was clear for all to see.

"..."

The intruders walked deeper into the passage, ignoring the Island Guard members who had completely lost the will to fight.

Now that they had defeated the powerful Sword Shaman, there was no one who could halt their advance.

The instant everyone came to that conclusion, silence ruled the world.

“...?!!”

The intruders lifted their masked faces, sensing that something was wrong—just to be sent flying, as if pummeled by some kind of invisible maul. Sounds cut through the air once more.

Even the armed Guardsmen fixated on the intruders had no idea what had happened. There was a gap in the continuity of their conscious minds. It felt jarring, like watching a film that was missing frames. It felt like time that had not existed had been forcibly wedged in. It was strange.

A sad murmur was audible over the ambient noise and whispers in the underground passage. “It appears I was too late.”

The speaker was a young woman dressed in strange attire. She wore a dazzling priestess outfit decorated with gold leaf and gemstones. Her attire was not particularly suited to the field of battle, but the dignified atmosphere it established around her suited her mysteriously well. Biting her lip in apparent lament, her gaze rested upon the Sword Shaman beneath her who had been gravely wounded to the brink of death in her attempt to stop the intruders.

One of the intruders spoke in an amused tone, muffled by the mask. “This attack... Koyomi Shizuka... One of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency...”

Without any warning, countless flashes of light flew forth and wrapped around their entire bodies. In reality, these flashes were actually silver chains shooting out from thin air.

Space rippled as a tiny figure in an extravagant dress appeared in front of the intruders. It was a witch with youthful, doll-like beauty.

Twisting her lips with displeasure, Natsuki Minamiya said, “So these are the intruders from the report. To think someone would come to beat down Keystone Gate through the front entrance. You’ve really taken the Gigafloat Management Corporation too lightly.”

Her silver, magic energy–imbued chains were entwined around the intruders multiple times over, completely preventing them from moving.

“Astarte, what’s the situation?” Natsuki asked the girl attending her from behind.

Astarte was a homunculus with indigo-colored hair wearing a maid outfit that for some reason had a wide-open back.

“Report: Bulwark at Gate Stratum Two Entrance D has been breached,” Astarte replied in a calm and composed tone. “Defense system silent. Island Guard Attack Mage Company depletion rate is sixty-four percent. Total number of intruders is three. No entries in the Sorcerous Criminal Database. Objective of attack is unknown.”

“Intruders with enough power to wreck the Island Guard with ease, and we don’t know their identities or their objective?”

Natsuki furrowed her brows in consternation. She found the lack of knowledge of the intruders’ identities unexpected.

With an established information network and the advances of demonic research, it was a day and age when data on sorcerous criminals could be shared instantly across the world. Setting aside small fry posing little threat, it was normally impossible for beings wielding such might as to defeat a Sword Shaman to remain unknown. If she had to cite exceptions, they would be the Aurora Series of Kaleid Bloods sealed across the course of centuries, or special cases like Kojou Akatsuki, a normal human who had been vampirized later in life.

“Well, fine. We can take our time checking that out post-capture.”

Koyomi cut in, her voice hard. “...No. It would not seem they are such simple foes.”

“What?” Natsuki turned to her in suspicion.

Directly after, a dull metallic sound reverberated through the underground passage. The silver chains sealing the intruders’ movements had lost their radiance, shattering with all the brittleness of candy canes.

“Laeding, chains forged by the gods... How were they severed?”

Natsuki’s voice was tinged with surprise. The chains she wielded as a weapon were forged by the ancient superhumans known as the Devas. They constituted a powerful sorcerous device created to capture monsters back in the Age of the Gods. They could not be easily destroyed short of smashing them with a

sorcerous device of equal or greater quality. Even the physical might of a beast person using divine bestialization could not rend them by brute force alone.

The faces of the Island Guard members twitched at the sight of the intruders regaining their freedom. Natsuki turned to them and shouted, "Take any injured still breathing and retreat! Astarte and I will do the rest!"

"B-but...!" cried a squad leader in a shrill, gloom-filled voice.

They knew that even if they stayed, they would only slow Natsuki down. Even so, they could not make the decision to abandon Natsuki and the others and flee. That would be an act of betrayal toward the comrades who had died in the line of duty.

"Don't worry, I'll hand you all the credit. This is my day off, after all... Or are you worried that I can't handle it?" Natsuki smiled at him.

He shook his head, his face pale from fright. "N-not at all..."

To the members of the Island Guard, the Demonslayer and Witch of the Void was an object of awe and terror. In a certain sense, defying Natsuki's orders and earning her ire was a far more terrifying prospect than fighting the intruders.

"...Good fortune in battle." The squad leader bowed respectfully, with the other members following suit. They no doubt realized that Natsuki's cold brush-off was sending them away from the field of battle for their own sake.

"Would you mind if I accompanied you?" Koyomi asked, somber. She watched the guard members begin their retreat.

Natsuki was cold and dismissive. "Do as you like."

She had dismissed Island Guard because they still didn't know the enemy's identity. She was fearful of the Guardsmen being caught up if the intruders launched a large-scale attack.

However, she didn't have to worry about that with Koyomi, who would likely manage on her own, and Natsuki had no duty of care toward her to begin with. To Federal Attack Mages like Natsuki, the Lion King Agency, similarly charged with countermeasures against sorcerous criminals, was akin to a business rival.

"What do you think the objective of this raid could be?" Koyomi calmly asked

as she watched the intruders leisurely rise to their feet.

“Fighting in an eye-catching way like this... Normally, you’d think it was a diversion, but these intruders are...”

“Yes. They are too strong for that,” Koyomi agreed.

“In the first place, a diversionary operation is meaningless where Keystone Gate is concerned. The main blocks are under the water’s surface, so the invasion routes are limited in number.”

Natsuki’s demeanor was plainly sour. “...They’re breaking down the front door to take the shortest route to their destination, but what value does raiding Keystone Gate have anymore?”

In the past, Keystone Gate was where the holy relic dubbed the Right Hand of the Saint was being kept. It was a nigh miraculous magical catalyst powerful enough to enable large-scale sorcery. In recent days, however, it had been returned to the kingdom of Lotharingia, its rightful possessor. There was nothing worth stealing left behind to justify a raid on Keystone Gate.

“If so, the objective might be assassination, terrorism...or perhaps a declaration of war?” Natsuki clicked her tongue.

There were many people who hated Demon Sanctuaries, symbols of the Holy Ground Treaty enshrining the peaceful coexistence of demons and humankind. Itogami Island, the only Demon Sanctuary in the Far East, had often come under attack from such sorts.

Therefore, these intruders belonging to an extremist terrorist group would not have felt especially surprising.

But then why were they attacking *now*?

“This is an effect of the Fourth Primogenitor’s absence,” Koyomi concluded.

Kojou Akatsuki, the Fourth Primogenitor and the World’s Mightiest Vampire, was indeed absent. He had taken advantage of Golden Week to visit the Northern European kingdom of Aldegia.

Of course this was top secret information, but many people were already aware. After all, Kojou had gotten involved in an international conflict, kicking

up an uproar resulting in the sinking of a flying battleship.

None of that amused Natsuki. “My staying on standby during the holidays wasn’t for nothing, then.”

“So it would appear.” Koyomi sighed with a smile.

It had been easy to anticipate that sorcerous criminals lurking on Itogami Island would use an absence of the Fourth Primogenitor as an opportunity to strike. That was why the Lion King Agency had dispatched one of its precious Sword Shamans to guard Keystone Gate earlier and why Koyomi had been on standby as reserve firepower.

“How unpleasant it is to be underestimated merely due to the Fourth Primogenitor’s absence. I also have something to return in full to them for harming my subordinate.” Koyomi shot the intruders an aggressive glare.

Aware of her hostility, the intruders prepared for battle. Unfortunately for them, Koyomi’s attack was already over.

The world was enveloped in momentary silence, and by the time sound returned once more, one of the intruders was lying on the ground.

Countless thin, whiplike blades impaled the flesh of one of the people in the white robes.

The shallow cuts had actually been inflicted by the silver long sword that had suddenly appeared in Koyomi’s hands. This had been used by her Sword Shaman subordinate earlier. The long sword’s blade had melted like quicksilver and changed shape into blades tens of meters in length, sewing the intruder to the ground.

“A blade made out of ritual-reactive metal... Is that the Lion King Agency’s new model?” Natsuki asked.

“Surely restraint is unnecessary against an opponent able to defeat our Sword Shamans.” Koyomi gripped the divine armament dubbed the Heidenröslein.

Developed to neutralize even a vampire primogenitor, it was one of the Lion King Agency’s forbidden weapons, sealed due to its power. Using such a powerful divine armament without hesitation was an expression of Koyomi’s

anger at her subordinate Sword Shaman having been injured.

“Hee...hee...hee-hee-hee...!”

A voice trickled out from beneath the foe’s lizard skull–motif mask.

It was a creepy, sneering laugh. Scorn trickled out from the figure’s comrades.

“Quite interesting... A most intriguing weapon... However...”

“What?!”

Koyomi’s eyes snapped wide in surprise at the blades of the Heidenröslein suddenly flying through the air, no longer keeping the opponent pinned.

White steam gushed out from gaps in the robe, melting the ritual-reactive metal blade as if it were heated wax.

Once more, Koyomi executed “Paper Noise”—her ability that guaranteed her to attack first.

Inserting time that ought not to have existed along with that silence, the effect of her attack suddenly appeared, as if a page in a book had been ripped out and discarded, but the result was the same. Even though Koyomi’s attack struck, the intruder’s body was unharmed. The dissolved blade of the Heidenröslein accomplished nothing, save flying and splitting apart.

“Gah...!”

Without warning, the intruder then closed the gap between it and Koyomi, grasping hold of her slender neck. He proceeded to suspend her in midair with one hand. The bladeless Heidenröslein fell to the floor.

Despite having the powerful ability to manipulate time, Koyomi’s flesh and blood was that of the frail girl she seemed. In terms of raw strength, she couldn’t possibly trade blows with a demonic intruder.

“Astarte, support Paper Noise!”

“Understood. Execute: Rhododactylos,” the homunculus promptly responded.

She summoned the humanoid artificial Beast Vassal implanted within her body and launched a punch at the intruder grasping Koyomi.

Astarte’s Beast Vassal, Rhododactylos, had two extremely powerful

characteristics: the nullification of all physical attacks and the reflection of demonic energy. No matter the true nature of the intruder's bizarre defensive strength, it would not work against Astarte and her Beast Vassal—or that's what Natsuki and Astarte believed.

A new figure was standing before Astarte's eyes, wearing a mask with a bull skull motif. They were gripping a dagger with a strange shape in their right hand. The curved weapon had a transparent blade that resembled a gentle ripple.

The intruder sliced the rainbow-glimmering humanoid Beast Vassal. It was so plain that a Beast Vassal with nullification abilities did not need to bother evading.

However, the instant the transparent blade swung down, a slender line was carved into the chest of the armor-like Beast Vassal enshrouding Astarte. It was a straight red line, like a string pulled taut.

"Astarte!" Natsuki's expression froze over.

The rainbow-colored Beast Vassal swayed and vanished, and a bloodied Astarte fell to the ground.

Staring at her battered body, the intruder with the bull mask slowly lowered the bloody curved blade. The one with the lizard mask continued wringing Koyomi's neck even after she had lost consciousness.

"Tch...!"

The space surrounding Natsuki flickered. Her weaponized silver chains shot out, attempting to entwine the intruders once more.

Yet, her attack did not activate. Natsuki suddenly realized that a slippery, serpentine sensation was coiling around her own arms and legs.

These were tentacles covered with dense, magically infused slime.

The third foe had spewed out countless black tentacles from beneath their robe, holding Natsuki in place. The demonic energy of the tentacles was interfering with her magic, preventing her from using her spatial control abilities.

A muffled, laughing voice echoed from under their skull-motif mask. “I have you...Witch of the Void.”

There were far more tentacles protruding from under the robe than seemed possible for the size of the attacker. Natsuki assumed the black tentacles were summoned from a different dimension much like her silver chains.

Natsuki’s delicate body creaked, but she kept her tone composed. “A spatial control ability even greater than mine... More than Rheingold...? Who are you...?”

“We are the Order of the End,” the figure in the human skull mask said triumphantly.

Tentacles wrapped all around Natsuki’s body, leaving it unclear whether the intruder’s voice was even reaching her.

“Since ancient times, we have served the true Fourth Primogenitor.”

The black tentacles vanished, reabsorbed within the pure-white robe, just as suddenly as they had appeared.

And now Natsuki was gone as well.

There was a squishy sound of something heavy being thrown. The person in the lizard mask had cast aside the unconscious Koyomi Shizuka.

The figure with the curved blade had already vanished down the underground passage, not even pausing to glance at the exploits of the other two, who then followed behind in their comrade’s footsteps.

“Master...”

The heavily wounded homunculus girl tried to stand up to chase after the abducted Natsuki. But she wobbled and collapsed upon the floor midway, her strength visibly exhausted. Her own bleeding left her entire body cold and drenched.

“Mas...ter...”

Astarte’s murmur echoed weakly in the underground passage.

Her consciousness sank into depths of darkness.

CHAPTER ONE
THE ELECTORAL WAR

CHAPTER ONE

THE ELECTORAL WAR

1

Kojou Akatsuki was utterly bewildered.

He was ten thousand meters in the air, traveling at a thousand kilometers per hour. He was in the cabin of a private jet flying from the Northern European kingdom of Aldegia to Itogami Island. It was a charter plane Princess La Folia Rihavein had arranged for Kojou and the others, heroes and saviors of the nation, as a surprise.

The cabin came equipped with everything: a dining room on par with a restaurant, large beds and shower rooms, and even multimedia entertainment. Kojou had just woken up on the leather-covered sofa in the theater room. He'd gone there with Yukina Himeragi, who was—though she would never, ever admit it out loud—afraid of sleeping on airplanes and had started watching an animal comedy targeted at children only to fall asleep.

Yukina was making quiet sleeping sounds right at Kojou's side.

Or perhaps it would be more precise to say, *against* Kojou's side.

Her arms remained wrapped around Kojou's arm as she slept, almost like a swimmer on the brink of drowning clinging to a life guard. She was also like a cat handed off to a familiar neighbor for safekeeping, looking reassured as she snuggled in a blanket left behind carrying her owner's scent.

If it was just that, he might call the scene heartwarming.

However, having their arms entwined together meant that Yukina's body was making direct contact with Kojou's in several places. Plus, in contrast to her unawareness of the fact, Yukina was beautiful.



Her body was quite slender and delicate to the eye, and her breasts felt very soft as they pressed against his upper arm. He couldn't put into words the scent that wafted up from her glossy hair. Her eyelashes were long. Her lips were pink. Her neck was exposed and defenseless. And he could see her blue veins right through her white skin—

Kojou hastily averted his eyes, feeling like he might lose himself if he kept staring.

He tentatively thought he needed to do something about their being so close together, but Yukina's arms had such a firm grip that he couldn't pull away. One false move and she'd end up dislocating Kojou's shoulder. It seemed that Yukina had put Kojou in an armlock while she was unconscious.

No matter how afraid of flying she is, does she have to hold me so tightly? Kojou couldn't help feeling exasperated. He agonized over how to free himself from her arms without waking her.

Consequently, Kojou's face ended up drawing very close to Yukina's.

"What are you doing?"

Kojou's eyes bulged, his movements halting as he heard a frigid voice from behind.

When he looked back, he saw a classmate with an extravagant hairstyle, her body clad in bold, almost comically fashionable clothing.

"...Oh, it's you, Asagi. Don't scare me like that." Kojou sighed with relief and glared with half-lidded eyes.

Asagi Aiba sourly puffed up her cheeks. "Whaddaya mean by that? Is hearing my voice a bad thing somehow?"

"That ain't it. I'm just in a pinch here 'cause I can't move my arm."

"Hmm... So your arm's numb from Yukina using it as a pillow the whole time?"

"I don't know how the heck an armlock looks like a pillow to you. More to the point, gimme a hand here. I can't move at all like this," Kojou pleaded, slightly teary-eyed from the extreme pain in his locked-up joints.

Asagi shrugged lightly and grudgingly began helping Kojou escape. Gazing at the side of Yukina's face as she slept defenselessly, Asagi exhaled with a twinge of envy.

"I know everyone has one or two things they have a hard time with, but to take it this far, that's not so much a flaw as a talent. Who'd think she'd be scared of airplanes that much...?"

"If you ask her, she'll stubbornly insist she's not afraid, though."

Kojou, finally freed from the armlock, made a strained smile as he stretched his stiff arm.

Yukina, a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, could not show weakness before others. After all, that would constitute an obvious weakness in the Fourth Primogenitor's observer. That was why she absolutely would not acknowledge her fear of airplanes despite it being blatantly obvious. Because he understood all that, Kojou pretended he didn't notice her fear.

"Well, seems like she finally got some sleep, so let's leave her like that for a little while."

Asagi glanced at her wristwatch. "That's fine, but we'll be landing soon. It'll probably be only another thirty minutes or so."

Kojou's eyes turned toward the window. However, the ultramarine night sky outside made it hard to track the passage of time. The plane was scheduled to land on Itogami Island before daybreak.

"Landing sooner than I thought."

"It feels like that because it was a smooth ride. We really must thank the princess."

"Feels to me like we deserved this much, though," Kojou murmured to himself as he glanced around the cabin of the extravagant private jet.

During their stay in the kingdom of Aldegia, Kojou had not only ended up being used by La Folia as her purported fiancé, but he had also nearly ended up being cleaved to death by her father. Additionally, he'd been caught up in an international-scale conspiracy, fighting against terrorists. Even if La Folia

showed a little consideration after all that, he didn't think it was anything to feel guilty about.

"Well, fine. So...did anything happen?" Kojou put on a serious expression. Surely she hadn't come to check on him solely for the sake of freeing him from Yukina's armlock.

"Well, a bit." Asagi nodded vaguely. It felt like a half-baked reaction coming from her. "This aircraft, as suits a high-class private jet, has its own Internet connection, but I lost my connection to Mogwai a little while ago."

"Mogwai? Ahh, that thing... The badly sewn teddy bear..."

Kojou recalled the sight of the AI avatar serving as Asagi's partner. Even charitably, he couldn't call the design very cool, but Mogwai was apparently a highly capable agent even so.

Asagi opened her eyes wide with incredulity. "What do you mean badly sewn?! He's cute!"

"Huh? Uh, well, if you think so, then that's great... So what about it?"

"I'm saying he won't respond no matter how much I call him. It's not just Mogwai, it looks like all of Itogami Island is having network hiccups. At the very least, all communications with the Gigafloat Management Corporation HQ have been cut."

"They were cut...?" Kojou replied, perplexed. He didn't have a single clue whether that was a grave issue.

As Kojou and Asagi moved from the theater room to the main cabin, a third party interjected himself into their conversation. Motoki Yaze was sitting in a seat in a reclining position as he held a sturdy mobile communication terminal in his hands.

"Doesn't look like problems cropped up in just the computer networks," he said. "Satellite phones and my family's private line are no good, either. Seems like the submarine communications cable got cut, so there's no way it's a simple hiccup. Thanks to that, we've got no idea what's going on back home."

"...Don't tell me this is Juranbarada's doing?" Kojou had no particular basis for

that suspicion, but he had a ferociously bad feeling nonetheless.

Asagi furrowed her brow. “You mean that First Primogenitor guy supposedly heading for Itogami Island?”

Just before departing the kingdom of Aldegia, Kojou had met a man calling himself Ki Juranbarada back at the airport. Immediately after the man left for Itogami Island a step ahead of Kojou and the others, they learned Juranbarada was the Lost Warlord, the First Primogenitor.

Kojou didn’t think it would be all that surprising if a man like him, bored of a long life as an immortal vampire, would kick up a disturbance on Itogami Island on a whim. Furthermore, the First Primogenitor’s loyal confidant, Velesh Aradahl, had warned him to absolutely not let his liege become bored. If he did, there was no telling what Juranbarada might do.

Yaze calmly shook his head as if to brush Kojou’s worry aside. “That seemed the likeliest story, but the timing doesn’t match up. From the little bit of digging I did, it seems like Itogami Island’s communications issues started before we even left Aldegia.”

“Oh... Then it’s got nothin’ to do with Juranbarada?”

“I’m not sure we can say it’s completely unrelated, though. We don’t actually know the reason why the First Primogenitor is heading all the way to Itogami Island.”

Asagi kept an optimistic view, though she sounded only half-convinced. “At minimum, it seems the First Primogenitor has nothing to do with the communications trouble.”

Kojou agreed, but there was still a fundamental problem: They still had no idea what the cause behind the loss of contact with Itogami Island was.

“Somehow, it feels like something like this happened before, too...,” Kojou murmured offhandedly as he continued glaring at the darkened window.

He remembered the Roses of Tartarus incident from three months earlier. During that incident, the Eight Trigrams Formation employed by the sorcerous terrorist group Tartarus Lapse had cut Itogami Island off from the rest of the world, obstructing the import of goods. That was certainly different from

network communications, but in the sense of isolating Itogami Island, the current situation was much the same.

Tartarus Lapse's objective had been to stir up anxiety within the island's populace—to then complete the destructive ritual magic they called the Roses of Tartarus. So he had to wonder if this obstruction of communications was no more than the prelude to a much graver incident.

His thoughts were erased by Yukina's voice as she suddenly raced into the cabin.

"Senpai!"

"...H-Himeragi?"

Kojou nervously looked back at Yukina to see her abnormally flustered. He assumed Yukina was angrily chasing him down for having abandoned her in the theater room while she slept.

She grabbed his arm and forcefully dragged him off.

"Senpai, please come with me right now!"

"Ahh...calm down, Himeragi. You don't have to worry. Planes don't fall out of the sky just like that."

"Right, right. This model of aircraft is popular because of its safety rating," Asagi added to try to put Yukina at ease, "and I heard the pilot was handpicked from the best of the Aldegian Air Force."

That did not ease Yukina's irritation. She glared at Kojou. "That is not the problem! Nagisa is—"

"What about Nagisa?!"

Kojou's expression tightened the instant his little sister's name came up. The way he hung on Yukina's every word made Yaze and Asagi glare with exasperated faces that practically screamed, *You and your damned sister complex.*

"Over here!"

Yukina dragged Kojou by the arm toward the main bedroom located at the

back of the cabin. His younger sister was wearing her vacation clothes and sitting on the edge of the wide double bed. Kanon Kanase was sitting close to her with concern. The two should have been deep asleep in that bedroom until moments before.

A ferocious choking feeling seized Kojou the instant he entered the room—it was the spiritual essence filling the bedroom. This powerful energy scattering out from Nagisa was a burden on Kojou’s vampiric body.

Realizing her brother had entered the room, Nagisa raised a frail voice. “Kojou...”

Kojou approached her, ignoring his discomfort. “Nagisa?! What happened?”

“Kojou... I’m scared, Kojou...”

Nagisa’s entire body was shaking as she put her weight against him. She wasn’t meaning to hurt him with that spiritual essence. She just couldn’t control it.

“You felt something? Like from before...?”

Kojou slowly stroked Nagisa’s hair as she trembled in his arms. Nagisa weakly gave a vague shake of her head.

“I don’t know, but...on Itogami Island...there’s something’s scary... There’s all kinds of bad emotions swirling... Bloodlust... Madness... It’s like a war is starting...”

“A war...? Why there?”

Kojou was shaken. Judging by the timing of Nagisa’s words and the communications troubles, certainly something was going on. If the First Primogenitor, Ki Juranbarada, had caught the scent of war brewing, Kojou could see how he’d take that as a reason to visit Itogami Island.

“No... Kojou... If you return to Itogami Island...”

Nagisa gripped Kojou’s collar. A huge amount of spiritual energy shot out from her entire body. Her own fears had triggered the explosion. Unable to withstand it, Kojou staggered back. Her power was so incredible that any normal demon would have been knocked out cold from being in the same

room.

Even though this explosion could not directly harm Nagisa's body, she could not endure a prolonged intense release of her spiritual essence, because its source was her very own life force.

"Oh no...!" Yukina gasped.

"Nagisa!" Kanon exclaimed.

They embraced Nagisa from both sides in an attempt to restrain her spiritual energy. Having experienced going right to the brink of transforming into angels, Yukina and Kanon both possessed top-class spiritual energy by the standards of humankind. Of course, their control was excellent as well.

The pair jointly deployed a barrier, which barely managed to keep Nagisa from running amok. Losing consciousness from the exhaustion of her strength, Nagisa collapsed onto the bed.

Asagi patted her chest in relief. Yaze was deflated as he squatted down to the floor.

Nagisa calmly slept as Kanon carefully watched the side of her face with visible concern. Then, Yukina shifted a serious look toward Kojou.

"Senpai, just now..."

"Y-yeah..." Kojou coughed painfully as he spoke. The dregs of lingering spiritual energy still inside his body were making it a little tough to breathe. He felt like a fish out of water. "Nagisa was a powerful spirit medium to begin with. Way back, she regularly went off to Grandma's for training. That was to keep troublesome stuff like Spirit Sight and premonitions from wrecking her body, but..."

Yaze had a pensive look as he sank into thought. "Seems like an abnormal situation, maybe even a war, is taking place on Itogami Island..."

After witnessing a release of spiritual essence on that level, it was difficult to brush off Nagisa's Spirit Sight as a figment of her imagination, all the more after they'd already confirmed the Itogami Island communication blockage.

"Even if Nagisa's Spirit Sight is right," Asagi said bluntly, laughing, "it's not like

we can just stay away, you know.”

No one spoke a single word in refutation. Everyone present had precious family and friends back on Itogami Island. It was the same for even Yukina, dispatched to Itogami Island in the course of her duties.

“In either case, it would seem best to emotionally prepare ourselves, so that we might respond to whatever situation presents itself,” Yukina said, taking on a sober, serious tone. Her words also seemed to carry a sense of duty; as a professional Attack Mage, she needed to hold herself together.

However, the private jet was assailed by a dull *thud* before her statement had ceased to reverberate. The frame heavily tilted like a rowboat tossed about by a storm.

“Kyaaaa!” Yukina shrieked.

“Th-the hell?!”

Catching Yukina before she tumbled to the floor, Kojou shifted his eyes beyond the window. It was just for an instant, but he felt like he could see a wingtip light against the pitch-black sky. “Is anyone hurt...?!”

An officer wearing an Aldegian Air Force uniform rushed into the cabin. She was a young lieutenant accompanying Kojou and company, attending to their needs during the flight. “I have a message from the captain. A civilian airplane deviating from its flight path is approaching. We have engaged in emergency maneuvers due to the danger of a near miss.”

“N-near miss...?” Yukina’s voice was shaking as she haltingly echoed the words. She was half in tears at the fact two planes had nearly collided in midair.

The officer confirmed with a sober nod. “Currently, we believe the cause is a cessation of communications from the air traffic control room at Itogami Central Airport.”

“Not being able to contact the airport control room... That’s pretty bad, ain’t it...?”

The latest news made even Kojou pale. If his memory was correct, an air traffic control room was a facility that granted landing rights to aircraft,

monitored an airport's airspace, and managed traffic in order to prevent accidents from occurring.

He didn't think a safe landing was possible as long as the air traffic control room was beyond reach. If there was another aircraft on the runway when they landed, they ran the risk of a horrific collision.

"Please rest at ease. We have altered our flight plan, and we are expected to land according to visual flight rules at a coast guard airbase in Itogami Island's southern district."

"The coast guard? Hmm...", Yaze murmured.

"VFR without radio guidance... In other words, a manual landing," Asagi said just as quietly. They both did not conceal their anxiety.

"Rest at ease" my ass, thought Kojou as he lifted his face toward the sky.

Suddenly realizing that Yukina had gone rigid, Kojou cast a sidelong glance at her.

"You okay, Himeragi?"

"Yes... It's not a problem... I'm all right... I'm all right..."

Yukina was still staring at the wall with hollow eyes, repeating the same phrase like a broken doll.

2

Like the Island Guard, the coast guard was an agency external to the Gigafloat Management Corporation, an autonomous paramilitary organization assigned to preserving order and safety in Itogami Island's maritime zone.

The scope of its mission was broad, including search and rescue, managing maritime traffic, apprehending smugglers and foreign infiltrators, and on top of that, magically surveying the ocean and even the capture or elimination of marine demon beasts. It was a crucial organization supporting the safety of Itogami Island, a city atop the ocean, from the shadows.

However, in contrast to the importance of its mission, one could not call its

budget extravagant. In particular, the coast guard's air base was a little sub-float tethered to Itogami Island's shore, and the base's "facilities" amounted to one narrow runway. The actual station was a two-story prefab wooden cabin, with even lampposts scarce in the surrounding area.

"This is my first time here, but it's *something*, huh?" Asagi said as she disembarked the runway.

"That's because this is a staging area for search and rescue teams and patrol planes." Yaze strained a smile as he walked down the ramp and surveyed the area. "Well, thanks to that, we were able to land even in this situation... 'Cause there ain't anything around these parts."

In spite of Kojou and the others' tension prior to the landing, the Aldegian private jet arrived at Itogami Island without problems. The pilot really had been the best of the best. The narrowness and shabbiness of the runway and landing manually without air traffic control hadn't posed any trouble whatsoever.

All that said, seeing a cutting-edge, high-class private jet parked at a station that looked practically abandoned was a disquieting scene in itself. The fact they were currently in an emergency situation had really been driven home.

The young lieutenant acting as a guide bowed politely. "We will be immediately departing for the Japanese mainland. We have a responsibility to convey this situation to our home nation."

From beside her, Nagisa grinned as she stood straight with perfect politeness. "Thank you for all the help. Please give our best regards to Miss La Folia."

"As you wish." The officer smiled, enchanted with Nagisa. Or perhaps the smile was relief that she'd somehow managed to carry out her mission.

When partings were finished, Kojou shot a worried glance toward Nagisa. It hadn't even been thirty minutes since she'd gone unconscious from her spiritual energy going berserk. "Nagisa, are you feeling okay already?"

However, all Nagisa gave him was a surprised blink of her eyes. It seemed that all memory of her time in Spirit Sight had dropped away from her mind.

"What are you talking about? If you wanna worry about someone, I think you should worry about Yukina."

“Ahh... Guess you’re right.” Kojou appeared conflicted as he agreed.

Certainly, any observer would say Yukina was far more worn down at the present juncture. Finally liberated from her fear and panic from when they landed, she was leaning against Kanon in a half-dazed state.

Asagi curled her lips as she checked the signal strength on the screen of her smartphone. “...It’s no use. Seems like the cell phone towers are down, too.”

“The street lighting feels pretty dim across the board.” Yaze narrowed his eyes with a pained expression.

It was past 3:00 AM, less than three hours until daybreak. However, many of the residents were nocturnal demons, so Itogami Island was normally rather bright even at that hour, particularly in the case of Island West—Itogami Island’s downtown—which evoked an image of brightly shining LED billboards and neon signs.

On this night, though, the entire island had gone quiet. That bright image seemed like a fairy tale. There was light from neither apartment buildings nor even vehicle headlights. The place was deserted, practically a ghost town.

“So what should we be doing from here?” Kojou asked as he came down from the airplane with everyone’s luggage. He hadn’t had a proper overseas trip since elementary school, so he’d thoroughly forgotten the fine details of the formalities upon returning.

Asagi raised both hands up, at a loss. “Normally we’d be going through customs, but where do we even go for that in this case? I’d ask someone working here at the air base among other things, but...”

She was the most accustomed to travel among them, but even she had no experience with this kind of situation.

Yaze grimaced a bit with a suspicious air. “Come to think of it, why isn’t anyone here to meet us?”

Here they were with a completely out-of-place high-end private jet helping itself onto their base with a bunch of high schoolers getting off it. The normal reaction would surely be for armed guards kept on standby to rush out and surround Kojou and the others.

However, the coast guard station remained silent without a single person coming into view. There probably wasn't anyone left at the station.

Perhaps personnel had been ordered to disperse, or perhaps they'd been wiped out—either way, there was no mistaking that the situation was extremely dangerous.

"No point sticking around in the middle of a runway, is there?" Yaze said.

"I suppose not. Maybe we can figure out something if we go to that building," Asagi agreed. She walked toward the weathered, prefabricated cabin.

She had barely taken a few steps when she warily came to a stop. She'd noticed that there were human silhouettes leisurely approaching them from the other side of the base, about ten people in all.

They all seemed to be in their twenties. Every last one wore shredded jeans and leather jackets and the like, biker chic from an age long past, and they wore sunglasses despite it being the middle of the night. They were really lacking in taste.

Nagisa noticed something sooner than the rest. "Kojou...!" Hiding behind her brother in fright, her shoulders trembled with worry.

"Are they from the coast guard? That's pretty far-out as uniforms go...," Yaze said, only half-serious.

"Like hell they are!" Asagi exclaimed, playing his joke straight.

However, both no doubt understood the gravity of the situation. The group's fashion sense wasn't the problem.

"Senpai, these are..."

Yukina was clutching her guitar case to her as she walked to Kojou's side. Somehow, she'd apparently recovered from her earlier despondent state.

"Demons, yeah."

Kojou nodded a bit. Because he lacked Yukina's training, Kojou was less sensitive to demonic energy than others, but even he could tell that these weren't normal human beings.

The man in the middle of the group coming off like its leader seemed particularly dangerous.

He was a full head taller than Kojou, probably close to two meters tall. However, what stood out far more was his breadth. He must have weighed over two hundred kilograms with room to spare. His physique wasn't buff like a sumo wrestler, either. He came off like an obese slob. His long, heavy metal rocker-style hair gave off an even more unsightly impression.

"What the heck? All brats, ain'tcha? You on a school trip or somethin'?" The long-haired big man gazed at Kojou and the others with a taunting laugh. "Well, fine. Welcome to the Ugaki Domain, brats."

"Ugaki...Domain?" Yaze repeated.

"The heck is that?" Asagi said in a guarded tone.

The term was unfamiliar to both of them. They had no clue how to respond to this "welcome."

An awkward silence passed between them. The big man hastily began to explain in an effort to smooth things along.

"Right. Figures ya don't know if you're overseas. A domain is an autonomous region. So to put it bluntly, this place belongs to me, Mark Ugaki."

"Mark... Okay...," Kojou said.

That name sure doesn't suit him, thought Kojou as he politely went along with it. This place belonged to the long-haired big guy.

Asagi boldly raised a hand. Having lived in a Demon Sanctuary for many years, her personality wasn't prone to flinching even when dealing with demons. "I'm not really sure what you're saying, but the gist is something like a delinquent turf war?"

Apparently, Asagi's attitude and question was rubbing them the wrong way. The minions around Ugaki were stirred up, going red-faced in unison.

"What'd you say?!"

"Who's a delinquent?! Don't look down on Ugaki, you bitch!!"

Asagi yelled back in a voice just as loud as the minions, “A-anyone would call you delinquents with one look at you from both your clothes and your attitude!”

Ugaki gave off a hearty laugh with an attitude that was oddly like a big shot. “Ha-ha. Well, fine. We can sweat the details later. Lemme get to the important part. Become my subjects. All of ya.”

“...Subjects?” Kojou muttered. He glanced at his friends.

Based on appearance alone, they’d expected Ugaki to request money and, failing that, to flirt. However, it was unexpected and downright creepy for their objective to be neither money nor women.

“The gist is to become members of my domain,” Ugaki explained. “If you become my subjects, I’ll protect ya from the other candidates. When this Electoral War ends and I become the ruler, it’ll be easy livin’ fer ya.”

The details remained unclear.

“...You’re sure this really isn’t a delinquent turf war?” Nagisa whispered to Asagi.

“So what, this is to become the boss of all the delinquents on Itogami Island...?” she replied quietly.

Overhearing this, the minions grunted at them, stirred up once more. Thanks to that, the conversation wasn’t moving forward at all. What they did manage to understand, if barely, was that Ugaki wanted Kojou and company to become his subjects. They’d come to that abandoned base to recruit him and the others to be part of their citizenry.

“Well, if ya don’t wanna become my subjects, that’s fine by me. That means becomin’ my enemy, though. I don’t show mercy—even against brats.”

Ugaki brazenly bared his teeth. His already large body swelled to over twice its previous size. His skin turned grayish with a blue-green sheen and seemed to harden into some kind of armor. His long, depressing-looking hair also turned gray. It resembled a beast person’s divine bestialization phenomenon, but he came off more like a wicked giant than a beast.

Kojou's expression did not change even after seeing this transformation. "What's with this guy?"

Yukina's face also remained calm as she gazed at the raging Ugaki. "A giant who can transform... A troll, I would think. They are considered rare across the globe. It is said that they have resilient bodies and high regenerative abilities."

"...That's it?"

"Er, well, yes."

Perhaps irritated by Kojou's and Yukina's less than impressed reactions, Ugaki suddenly punched the ground right before him. "What are you two yammerin' about? Look at my peerless, herculean strength, dammit—!"

The runway's surface caved in as if some giant hammer had slammed into it. As Ugaki squatted, there was also a large hole spreading from under his feet, sending asphalt fragments flying all over the place.

Ugaki's underlings thrust their fists into the air as they cheered in unison.

"Whoaaaaa!"

"That's our Ugaki!"

"He's totally invincible!"

"The Fourth Primogenitor's got nothin' on him!"

"Fwa-ha-ha-ha, ya see now?!"

Bathed in praise from his underlings, Ugaki pushed his chest out, soaking in their cheers.

However, the right hand with which he had punched the ground was oddly bent right around the wrist. Unlike civilian roads, which just had an asphalt surface on top of gravel and sand, aircraft runway asphalt ran more than two meters thick. In addition, the artificial isle construction materials underneath it were hardened to withstand the impact of landings. It was only natural to be hurt from punching that with your bare hand.

"Um, that was impressive...but doesn't your hand hurt?" Kojou grimaced.

Ugaki's bloodied middle and ring finger joints were bent in odd directions,

sending a slight chill up Kojou's spine just from the sight of them.

However, Ugaki seemed to have been waiting for him to ask that question, full of pride as he thrust that very hand toward Kojou.

"Hey you, don't take me for a softy! It's from here on out yer gonna learn the true terror of Ugaki the Great!"

Ugaki's entire body was enveloped with the glow of demonic energy.

The glow was coming from the demon registration bracelet Ugaki wore on his right wrist. This was both the identification that proved he was a demon officially registered as a citizen of Itogami City and a demon monitoring device that transmitted the wearer's physical state, location data, and more for tracking purposes.

The bracelet activated small-scale magic that sent Ugaki's body into overdrive. Ugaki's injured wrist mended with incredible force, displaying a speed of healing that put a vampire's regenerative ability to shame.

"What's with this magic...?!" Asagi's voice quivered.

A demon registration bracelet had simple magical circuits on the inside, but it wasn't the first time she'd seen them used contrary to their proper purpose. Previously, they'd been hacked from the outside to force the wearer's demonic energy into a berserk state, but the bracelets had been further improved since to close that security loophole. She would know—it was Asagi herself who had carried out the work.

At present, interfering with the demon registration bracelets was only possible via the Gigafloat Management Corporation's City Management System at Keystone Gate. That was why Asagi was shaken. That meant someone had hijacked Keystone Gate.

"Ritual magic," Yukina concluded, analyzing the nature of Ugaki's spell from the flow of his demonic energy. "His comrades' demonic power is being sent to him with spell symbols."

It wasn't just Ugaki surrounded by the glow of demonic energy. Little magic circles hovered on the skin of the henchmen surrounding Ugaki, with lines of demonic energy linking them to Ugaki's demon registration bracelet. He was

using the demonic energy thus absorbed to heighten his own healing ability.

“So that’s why he’s gathering followers,” Yaze said with a smidgen of admiration. “In other words, the more subjects he gathers up, the greater the demonic energy he can absorb.”

In contrast to Ugaki’s oddly high level of vigor, the followers whose demonic energy he was absorbing were being exhausted at an incredible pace. However many subjects he’d gathered, it wasn’t enough. If he had a sufficient number of subjects, the demonic energy he could use would be nigh inexhaustible. It might even be on par with a vampire primogenitor.

“Okay... I get the gist of the situation.” Kojou shook his head with annoyance.

He didn’t know for what purpose someone had given Ugaki such a spell, but he understood Ugaki’s objective and his motivation for action. He was also keenly aware that he did not have the luxury of sympathy.

In short, this man was drunk on the great power he’d obtained. He was an idiot living for the thrill of the moment. He didn’t even notice that his underlings were being whittled down as they paid the price for his use of their power.

“Himeragi, please.”

“Yes.”

Nodding at Kojou’s words, Yukina slowly stepped forward. She opened the lid of the guitar case she carried, drawing the sheathed Snowdrift Wolf from within. With a small, grating sound, its various parts deployed, transforming into a full-length spear—a fully metallic, silver-colored spear.

“Hey, hey, are you planning to take on Ugaki the Great with that toothpick?” He laughed and raised his middle finger.

With a stout body and a fast healing ability, from Ugaki’s point of view, a spear or two couldn’t have felt threatening in the slightest, all the more so if the wielder was a little girl.

“...Huh?!”

The instant Yukina’s spear flashed out, Ugaki’s eyes went round, stiffening

from shock.

This was because the glow of demonic energy enveloping his surroundings had vanished without any warning. He'd been cut from the demonic energy lines stretching from his underlings, and the magic symbols marking them as *subjects* had disappeared, too. This meant that no matter how much they hurt Ugaki, his henchmen wouldn't be the ones bearing the brunt anymore.

"Sorry, Ugaki. I'm tired from a long trip. Sucks to be you, but I'm gonna cut this short." Kojou ferociously curled up the corners of his lips. Their surroundings were enveloped in crimson mist that transformed into malevolent demonic energy: a mass of energy so dense that it possessed its own sentience.

"H-hold on a sec... What's with this ridiculous pressure...?! What the hell are you...?!" Ugaki shrieked, only for the sudden whipping of a vortex to erase his words.

"C'mon over, Al-Nasl Minium!"

Rising amid those rampaging winds was a huge bicorn, flickering like a mirage. This was a Beast Vassal, a summoned beast from another world serving a vampire from within his own blood.

The bicorn bellowed, and its roar mowed Ugaki down along with his minions, digging a massive hole into the runway. Ugaki's punch didn't hold a candle to the yawning crater, easily tens of meters in radius.

"Well, I guess that's that."

Kojou languidly murmured as he released the Beast Vassal from the summons. A few lingering ragged gusts were all that remained as the scarlet bicorn vanished.

Ugaki rolled at the edge of the crater gouged out by the Beast Vassal, eyes spinning in terror. Witnessing the sight, his underlings lost their senses and scattered, running for the proverbial hills.

"So what is this 'Electoral War' thingy anyway...?" Kojou asked as he stared down at the still-prone Ugaki. Of course, the unconscious giant didn't reply.

Nagisa let out a shrill cry. "Kojou! Look!"

She was looking in the direction of a canal cutting right through the center of the island.

As a result of the Beast Vassal's indiscriminately raging winds, the nighttime mist shrouding the runway's environs had been blown away. Thanks to that, they were able to get a clear look at the state of the island.

Aside from the minimal level of lighting, it looked virtually unchanged from when Kojou and company had departed. It was the familiar skyline of the artificial isle...except for one thing, obvious to everyone's eyes.

They were looking at the building in the center of the island. There were cracks running across a huge building shaped like an inverted pyramid that stood at the center of the island. It looked like the aftermath of someone driving a gargantuan sword into it.

The sight felt akin to a declaration of war against Itogami Island itself.

"Someone...wrecked...Keystone Gate...?"

With a parched voice, Kojou somehow managed to wring out those words.

The disaster that had befallen Itogami Island had finally hit them in the face.

3

About fifteen minutes passed until Mark Ugaki woke up.

He'd been bluntly set down on the floor of the abandoned coast guard building. This was not intentional humiliation of any kind; the sofas and benches in the building just weren't big enough to support Ugaki's huge body.

He'd tossed around in his sleep and bumped the floor, and the resulting pain made him regain consciousness. Peering in at Ugaki from the side with a look of concern was Kanon.

"Um... Are you all right?" she asked.

"Y...yeah..."

Ugaki blinked in wonder at the silver-haired, blue-eyed girl calling to him so gently. He must have had difficulty accepting the sight before him as real.

Kanon smiled softly in relief, an expression that could brighten the whole world.

“...Is this...heaven?”

Ugaki exhaled, enraptured. He really thought Kojou had killed him earlier.

Kojou gave Ugaki's forehead a good, hard smack. “Like hell it is. You just got scared and fainted from the blast!”

“Guoaah?!”

Groaning from the pain in his forehead, Ugaki looked like he'd just woken up from a dream. His gaze shifted to Kojou's face, whereupon he gasped, visibly wary as he sat up.

“Y-you're that...!”

“Please do not move.”

When Ugaki sat up, a silver blade was pointed right at his throat. The cold sensation made Ugaki draw in his breath.

“This spear nullifies demonic energy. Your troll healing ability will be of no use.”

Yukina, poised with Snowdrift Wolf at the ready, emotionlessly looked down at Ugaki as she spoke. In terms of angelic appearance, she was hardly inferior to Kanon, but Yukina's hostility made her come off like an angel of death.

Asagi, seated in a cheap office chair, crossed her legs as she coldly said, “Your allies ran away, so I'm not sure how far your precious healing power would get you anyway.”

The two of them were so irritated from having seen the wrecked Keystone Gate. Now that they knew Itogami Island was in far greater danger than they had assumed, they had precious little time to be dealing with the likes of Ugaki. In the worst case, they'd have to resort to threats and intimidation to make Ugaki talk.

Fortunately, Ugaki seemed to have long lost his will to resist already. Seeing Kojou's Beast Vassal up close had definitely affected him. There would be no need to resort to further violence.

“I guess I’ll ask the first question,” Kojou said, his tone serious. “What happened on Itogami Island while we were gone?”

Ugaki’s gaze wandered as Yukina touched the tip of her spear to his throat. “Er, um...asking what happened isn’t very specific...”

Asagi savagely slammed the top of a steel desk, her patience worn thin. “When was Keystone Gate wrecked? Who did it?”

“Th-that was the Fourth Primogenitor—”

“What?!” Kojou roared, eyebrows raised.

Ugaki cringed. “I’m not lyin’! It’s the truth, Big Bro!”

“When did I become your...?! Whatever. Give us some details, dammit!”

Enraged, Kojou grabbed Ugaki by his collar and lifted him up, shaking his huge troll neck back and forth enough that it rattled.

“Y-yesterday... No, the night before yesterday. Keystone Gate got raided by a group calling themselves the Order of the End.”

“...Order of the End?”

The unfamiliar name made Kojou tilt his head. A perplexed expression came over Yukina as well.

“They wear creepy masks that look like skulls. They tell people they’ve been servin’ the true Fourth Primogenitor since ancient times...,” Ugaki explained, timid.

“The true Fourth Primogenitor...” Asagi rested her cheek on her palm. “I don’t like this.”

A mysterious group claiming to serve the Fourth Primogenitor attacked under cover of darkness, decimating Keystone Gate. She could hardly blame people for mistaking the perpetrator of Keystone Gate’s wrecking for the Fourth Primogenitor.

“What the hell’s the Island Guard up to?” Yaze cut in. “They should’ve been on special alert.”

The possibility of sorcerous terrorism occurring during Kojou’s temporary

absence from Itogami Island had been considered in advance. Naturally, the Gigafloat Management Corporation had initiated countermeasures, bolstering the Island Guard's numbers and even requesting support from the Lion King Agency. He would never have thought Keystone Gate would fall that easily.

Ugaki turned to Yaze in incredulity. "People say they were wiped out!"

"Wiped...out...?" Yaze blinked in abject shock.

If Keystone Gate's defense force had been wiped out, that meant Natsuki Minamiya—the Witch of the Void—as well as Koyomi Shizuka—Paper Noise—had been defeated as well. Anyone familiar with their might would find such a tale hard to believe.

"From what I heard, three people from the Order of the End took over the Gigafloat Management Corporation headquarters, the City Management System included. The proof is...right here."

Ugaki showed them the demon registration bracelet he wore on his left wrist. A complex symbol of multilayered geometric shapes was hovering on the screen of the bracelet-style ID device's screen.

Yukina's voice was sharp. "The ritual magic spell you used earlier?"

Ugaki fidgeted in fear and nodded. "This proves you're a ruler candidate. The right to use this an' make pacts with subjects was granted to all demons. The more subjects you have, the bigger the demonic energy the ruler candidate gets."

Kojou snorted in exasperation. "So that's why you were doing the hard sell earlier."

Ugaki lowered his eyes with a guilty expression. "Sorry 'bout that."

Maybe he'd reflected on what he'd done; he started talking about it in dribs and drabs without anyone having to push.

"At first people treated it like a little game. But along the way, it escalated to nabbing subjects and felt a whole lot more like tryin' to kill one another. To win, you gotta gather up all the subjects you can, and if you can't, the only other way is gettin' under a powerful ruler candidate's banner."

“A game?! If they take energy from people at a rate like that, there’s no way subjects’ll be able to hold out! One screwup and normal humans or even demons with low endurance will shrivel up and die!” Kojou yelled.

Asagi spoke as if chiding the irritated Kojou for his anger. “The group that set this up doesn’t seem to care about that.”

Kojou clenched his teeth. “The Order of the End...”

He wasn’t inclined to fully trust Ugaki, but at the very least, the troll seemed to have told them the truth up to that point. They’d already confirmed that the demon registration bracelets had been hacked, and they’d seen him collect demonic energy from his subjects. Keystone Gate had indeed been destroyed. More importantly, he didn’t think the guy had the guts to lie under the circumstances.

“So what did this Order of the End group want to use you all for?” Kojou asked.

“The Electoral War,” Ugaki replied in earnest. “It’s a no-holds-barred competition between ruler candidates, and the candidate to survive and win and unify all the domains gets to rule Itogami Island in the Fourth Primogenitor’s place, they say.”

“In the Fourth Primogenitor’s place? Who the hell went and decided something like that?” Kojou growled. He had little appreciation of being the ruler of Itogami Island, but that didn’t mean Kojou was all right with someone arbitrarily having his successor picked behind his back.

But the individual’s name on Ugaki’s lips was not what he’d expected.

“Th-the Fourth Primogenitor.”

“Whaaat?”

“That’s right. The Fourth Primogenitor said so in this promo video that’s, like, everywhere.”

“A video?”

“Yeah. If you doubt me, just turn the TV on. Doesn’t matter what channel you pick, either.”

Ugaki pointed to a small LCD monitor at the corner of the cabin. It was a completely common TV for domestic use. It belonged to the coast guard. A remote control was placed on the wall nearby.

Nagisa, right by the wall, reached out to the TV and turned the power on.

The individual displayed upon the screen was far outside Kojou's expectations. He was a handsome boy with a delicate physique.

"?!"

Yukina lifted her face as if someone had slapped her. There was an air of anger and fear hovering in her eyes. The fingers with which Yukina gripped her silver spear made little spasms from the strain.

"Him...? Why?!"

"...Himeragi? You know this guy?" Kojou asked, surprised by Yukina's reaction. It was the first time Kojou had seen Yukina show such aggressive emotion on her face.

"...He's...!" Yukina tried to explain, but her emotions had run so far ahead that she couldn't get the words out.

That instant, the boy on the TV screen slowly opened his mouth, his eyes remaining shut as he spoke.

"This announcement is for all humans, as well as all demons residing on Itogami Island."

He had white skin and golden hair that billowed like a flame. Kojou had déjà vu just from looking at him. For no particular reason, the sight of a boy looking so much like *her* unnerved him.

The boy smiled beautifully as he continued.

"My name is The Blood, ruler of the Dominion of Itogami city-state. Some call me the Fourth Primogenitor, the World's Mightiest Vampire."

His voice was melodic as it solemnly spread throughout the darkness.

Kojou and the others stood in a daze as they watched him smile.

“They...got us good.”

Asagi was the first to recover from surprise. An expression of keen regret came over her as she ground a heel against an adjacent trash bin in a fit of pique.

“Hiding Kojou’s true identity really bit us in the ass,” Yaze said, covering his eyes with his right hand. “We never thought a fake Fourth Primogenitor would just show up and claim the name.” He was slumped against a wall as if he’d been slugged in the gut. He seemed humiliated by the fact their own plan had been used against them.

“On top of that, they picked a time when Kojou wasn’t on Itogami Island to strike.”

“Going out of their way to smash Keystone Gate up must’ve been to make their might easier to see, huh? Pretty damn thorough.”

“Hey, is this the time to be admiring the jerk?!” Kojou exclaimed, indignant.

He’d previously heard about the existence of the boy calling himself The Blood from Yukina. He was the ringleader behind the group that had shut Kojou and others in another dimension dubbed Onrai Island, toying with other people’s hearts to run experiments over and over.

Kojou was full of energy. “We’re gonna nab that brat and put an end to this Electoral War nonsense! What should I do?!”

“Hmm... Without checking out the situation some more, there’s not really much to say.” In contrast, Asagi’s reply was realistic.

“The first thing we want is intel,” Yaze said calmly. “We want to know the Order of the End’s numbers and strength, and I’m mindful of just how far the effects of this war have spread.”

Kojou could only call his assertion a truly sound one. They had too little info to work with at the moment.

Nagisa, who’d held her silence until that point, gently grasped Kojou’s sleeve.

“...Hey, Kojou... Mimori and Gajou are safe, right?”

Asagi hopped right up and strongly hugged Nagisa from behind. It was the natural behavior you'd expect from real sisters.

“Yeah... I can't help worrying over relatives and friends, too. Aw, darn it...! I could find out in a flash if only I could use Mogwai...”

“So the real problem is Keystone Gate, huh...?” Kojou clenched a fist as he shot a glance at the screen of his cell phone, still showing it was out of range.

The cessation of the communications network and the ritual magic using the demon registration bracelets were both happening because the Order of the End had taken over Keystone Gate. In other words, if they took back Keystone Gate, they could stop the Electoral War that The Blood had instigated.

Of course, the issue was that they didn't know anything about the Order of the End.

Kojou didn't think they could take on this level of foe by charging in without a plan and no idea as to the enemy's strength. That's why Asagi and Yaze were claiming they needed information first.

However, thanks to the communications network being down, they had no way to gather that information. Getting involved in the war was risky, as was blithely approaching urban areas.

The heck should we do? thought Kojou as he clutched his head.

Ugaki raised a timid voice. “Um...incidentally, how long did you plan on sticking around here, Big Bro?”

“Is it inconvenient for you if we're here?” Kojou brusquely questioned back, too tired to correct the *Big Bro* part.

Ugaki's shoulders tightened out of nervousness. “No, the other way around. I'm totally cool with it, but you used some pretty off-the-wall demonic energy back there. I'm just thinking, wouldn't folks in other domains notice that stuff, too?”

“Oh, right...” Asagi gasped in sudden realization. “By conventional thinking, using strong demonic energy means you have a lot of subjects under your belt.”

Ugaki nodded firmly with a *now you get what I'm sayin'* look. "Yeah, that's what I mean, Sister!"

"No way I'm a 'sister' to you! Next time you call me that, I'm calling you Pork Troll!"

"P-Pork Troll...?!"

That extremely callous rebuke struck Ugaki at his core, as if he lived in a world bereft of pity. Kojou sympathized with the guy a little. It was doubtlessly a riff on his being a corpulent troll, but it was a truly awful nickname to be known by.

"More importantly, what happens if folks in other domains notice it?" Kojou asked.

"Huh, I wonder. It'd be great if they chickened out and ran...," Ugaki replied, "but these are guys who think they can be rulers of Itogami Island in place of the Fourth Primogenitor an' all."

Certainly, if they were runts enough to run in terror from Kojou's Beast Vassal, they could be left alone and that was that. However, ruler candidates coming to attack in spite of that would be a problem; the chances they'd come with a plan and the power to take on Kojou were rather high.

"...The chance of simple morons without any survival sense coming seems pretty high, too," Yaze commented, staring at Ugaki.

Kanon abruptly squatted down at Ugaki's side, like something had suddenly come to mind. "The ritual magic from earlier has a side effect of increasing the caster's aggression. Am I correct?"

Ugaki blushed as Kanon stared into his eyes. He felt tense. "Ahh, now that you mention it, I get the feelin' you're right. It's kinda like a high."

Yaze clicked his tongue as he realized the gravity of the situation.

The ritual magic the Order of the End had put together had the side effect of making demons belligerent. Even normally laid-back demons' personalities were becoming aggressive.

If not for that, even with Keystone Gate wrecked, there was no way demons would fight one another in unison. Normally, everyone wearing demon

registration bracelets of a Demon Sanctuary were citizens who desired peaceful coexistence with humankind.

“So that’s what this is...,” Yaze said. “What a pain. It might be a good idea to change locations before weirdos start showing up.”

“Yeah, but where? And how?” Asagi asked.

Even if they left Ugaki, they were a group of six young boys and girls; wandering around in the dead of night would make them stand out like a sore thumb even in normal times. Doing it smack in the middle of this situation was practically begging to be attacked. They needed to think of some kind of countermeasure.

Before Yaze could come up with a tangible plan, he sensed Yukina going on guard.

“No...” She tightened her grip on her silver spear and moved toward the window in the wall.

“...Himeragi?”

“Unfortunately...it would seem we are too late.”

“Some new candidate bunch?” Kojou’s expression grew grave as he looked out the window.

Yaze swiftly turned off the room’s lights.

Kojou spotted a group climbing over the fence surrounding the base and approaching the building. Their numbers were greater than he’d expected—over sixty just from what he could count on the fly. They didn’t have a single defined outfit like Ugaki’s underlings had worn, but their movements somehow seemed to share similar quirks.

Ugaki poked only half his face up the window when his voice went shrill with fear. “This is bad... That’s the Rogues Alliance.”

“...That naming sense sure makes them sound dangerous,” Kojou murmured, unmoved.

Ugaki and his people had a terrible fashion sense. Meanwhile, *Rogues Alliance* sounded just right for a domain name. Kojou had to wonder if that wasn’t some

name taken from a gang out in the sticks.

“You don’t have time to act all calm!” Ugaki’s eyes were in tears as he pleaded. “These guys are an alliance of four domains from around these parts. The leadership’s all beast people, and I heard they’ve got over seven hundred subjects...”

Kojou looked back at Ugaki in surprise. “That’s a lot of people to get in just two or three days, right...?”

“That’s how busy they’ve been crushin’ everyone else. Smashing big domains and grabbin’ their subjects is a pretty efficient way to build their own power...”

“Sure seems like it...”

Kojou understood the reason for Ugaki’s nervousness. It was a federated domain of street fighters that’d swelled in size through repeated conflicts. They would definitely be dangerous opponents.

“We are completely surrounded,” Yukina stated. Even so, she was calm.

“I don’t feel like talking things over will get us anywhere. What do we do? Bust through?” Kojou asked.

The Rogues Alliance supposedly had over seven hundred members, but it didn’t seem they’d gathered the whole crew before coming. However, it was possible there were as many as three hundred people surrounding the building Kojou and the others were in. Based on their battle formation, the officer-class beast men had between twenty and thirty people. Numbers like that were a bit tough to take on in a frontal brawl.

“No... Against beast men, it would be difficult even for the two of us to completely escape them,” Yukina said.

If it was just a matter of comparing offensive power, vampires able to summon Beast Vassals were on top, but in terms of physical demonic abilities, beast people were leaps and bounds ahead. There was a great deal of individual variation, but many beast people possessed explosiveness and endurance and excellent senses of smell and hearing, making shaking off their pursuit frighteningly difficult.

On top of that, the only people on their side capable of fighting such people were Kojou and Yukina—busting through under those circumstances just wasn't realistic.

"If we can't break through, should we hole up? But that'd be a siege with no hope of reinforcements..." Yaze sighed as he gazed at the center of the room.

"In the first place, this is a little cabin, not a castle," Asagi said nervously. "If they light it on fire, we're finished."

Thanks to not expecting any combat on the surface, the coast guard station was a cheaply built prefab. It just wasn't built to withstand siege warfare.

"Shit... This is a pain. So what's the move? Kick all their butts instead?"

"You can't, Kojou," Asagi said earnestly. "If what Pork Troll said is true, they're victims of The Blood's magical manipulation, too, right?"

Kojou felt pained as he lowered his shoulders. Even the members comprising the belligerent Rogues Alliance were originally Itogami Island citizens wanting to live in peace. If possible, Kojou didn't want to hurt them, either.

"Deceiving and controlling so many unrelated people... This is just like back at Onrai Island," Yukina said in frigid anger.

Previously, the boy calling himself The Blood had employed devices known as nano-*shikigami* to make people run amok and attack Kojou en masse. This was surely his doing as well.

It was as if The Blood was mocking Kojou's fate, betrayed by those he was meant to protect.

Kanon's voice pulled Kojou's mind back to reality from its momentary lapse. "Akatsuki!"

The skylight, which they'd neglected to take into account, split apart, and glass fragments poured down onto the floor. A bestialized wolf man poked his head through the skylight.

Kojou launched a ferocious punch toward the wolf man, dropping down from the skylight. "Kanase, get down!"

The wolf man evaded Kojou's punch with ease. Even the vampirized Kojou

couldn't keep up with a beast person's agility. In a cramped space, it was the other side with an overwhelming advantage.

But Yukina's attack speed was even greater than that of a beast person's. Using her Future Sight as a Sword Shaman, she could see an instant into the future and act accordingly. The wolf man could not evade Yukina's attack, launched after already predicting which way her opponent would dodge.

"Roaring Thunder!"

Yukina's ritual-energy-imbued kick exploded into the back of the beast person's skull.

His brain ferociously shaken by the blow, the beast person was unable to even let out a cry as he collapsed onto the floor. Witnessing Yukina's might firsthand unhinged Ugaki's jaw.

But that single beast man hadn't been the only enemy entering the building. Other beast people of the Rogues Alliance broke through windows all over the place, pouring down like an avalanche.

"We found 'em! It's Ugaki!"

"Don't let him get away! Circle round the back, too!"

"Whoo, chicks! There's chicks here!"

With the guttural, hard-to-understand voices peculiar to beast people, the men let loose with excited cries. Kojou's group was still on the defensive, forced into a corner of the room.

Kojou uneasily gritted his teeth, unable to summon a Beast Vassal in a cramped building. "Shit, there's too many of 'em!"

Yukina was desperately fighting, but it was all she could do to keep the beast people at arm's length, and the Rogues Alliance numbers kept on increasing. With numerous comrades of theirs surrounding the building, any chance for escape was slim to none.

Even if Kojou could intimidate them with a Beast Vassal, the Rogues Alliance members were in such an excited state that there was no telling if it would even have any effect.

So there really is no way but to beat them, thought Kojou, a look of despair coming over his face.

He had no clue about the depths of true despair that had already crept so very close.

5

“Koujou!”

Nagisa’s high-pitched shriek caught Kojou’s attention, and he looked back in a surprised panic, fearing some new beast person had appeared and was attacking her.

Fortunately, she was safe. However, her fearful eyes were locked on a scene outside a broken window. A horde of huge tentacles resembling some creature’s innards had emerged out of the darkness of night. Making squishy sounds, they invaded the building, wrapping around surprised beast people one after another.

“What’s with these tentacles...?!”

Kojou stood in shock, unable to react to the unexpected turn of events.

The scared beast men were resisting, but the dark tentacles mercilessly constricted their captives as if they were pythons and dragged them outside the building. It was reminiscent of a fiendish carnivorous plant trapping its prey. The scene was repulsive.

“Ah... Ugh... Aaaah...!” Ugaki made low groans, his face completely pale.

He was looking at individuals in white robes, hovering in midair.

Three bizarre figures were standing on a tangle of tentacles. Each wore masks—lizard, bull, and human skulls respectively.

Ugaki had fallen into a state of panic by the time Yaze shook his shoulder and muttered, “Hey, what gives?”

Ugaki clutched his head like a frightened child. His mumbling sounded delirious. “It’s them... It’s the Order of the End...!”

“What...?!” Yaze exclaimed, surprised. He turned his head up toward them.

All the while, the black tentacles mopped the floor with the Rogues Alliance beast people. It wasn't just the ones who had entered the building, either. The ones on standby outside and the subjects surrounding them were attacked one after another, mowed down without mercy.

“This is horrible...!” Asagi shuddered.

The Rogues Alliance encirclement had already crumbled. Even so, the attacks did not relent. The subjects who fled in panic were simply attacked from behind, beaten down until they were tattered.

One member of the Order of the End was controlling the tentacles; it was the individual with the human skull mask.

“Stop iiiiiiittt!”

Unable to bear it any longer, Kojou leaped out of the building. Even if the Rogues Alliance people were from a belligerent domain, he couldn't stand quietly and watch them get beaten to death.

“The hell are you trying to pull?!” Kojou yelled. “You put them up to this, didn't you? Dammit...!”

His right hand lashed out, cleanly slicing through every tentacle within his field of vision. He'd summoned a fraction of the power of the Beast Vassal of Severing.

The detached tentacle pieces dissolved into thin air and vanished.

The caster manipulating the tentacles was of course unharmed. Kojou felt like the three individuals were smiling scornfully from under their masks. The three members of the Order of the End spoke to Kojou in turn.

“Kojou Akatsuki... Inheritor of the line of the Kaleid Blood...”

“We are the Order of the End. We have served the true Fourth Primogenitor since ancient times.”

“It is our duty to make thee realize thou art king and guide thee to thy true awakening.”

Kojou was dumbfounded, but only for a moment—ferocious anger welled up inside him. The whole point of the Electoral War was to awaken *him*.

“You’re saying this nonsense is for me...?! Like hell it is...!!”

Kojou poured strength into his feet. Giving in to his anger, he prepared to rush at the Order of the End members, who had descended to the ground. He’d smash their faces in.

But somebody else was on the move first, leaving Kojou in the dust. Survivors from the Rogues Alliance, the leadership-class beast men, were rushing in.

“Why, you! How dare you do that to our buds—?!”

“We’ll kill ya!”

“You idiots, don’t!” Kojou shouted, uneasy at the sight of the beast men recklessly charging head-on. He instantly tried to summon a Beast Vassal to lend them some support.

Simultaneously, Yukina leaped out of the building. She attempted to use the Divine Oscillation Effect of Snowdrift Wolf to nullify the Order of the End’s magic.

Regardless, the three Order of the End members were swifter.

A horde of tentacles shot out from thin air, entwining around Kojou’s entire body, impeding his summons.

The slender figure wearing the bull mask intercepted Yukina. With a transparent curved sword, they blocked the silver spear and obstructed Yukina’s charge.

Then, the figure wearing the lizard mask received the beast people’s attacks.

The instant they came into contact with the figure, the beast people’s bodies were enveloped by pure-white steam and flames. The beast people screamed out, and the distasteful smell of burning flesh wafted all around. The ground under their feet boiled, and the asphalt melted. It was an incredible amount of heat.

“Khh...” A voice of unease trickled out of Yukina. Ferocious sparks scattered before her eyes.

Overwhelmed by the slicing attacks of the transparent curved sword, Yukina was being forced back inch by inch.

The swordsmanship of the Order of the End member far surpassed Yukina's skill. Even with a Sword Shaman's Future Sight and the reach advantage of her spear, it was all she could do to hold her own. If anything, it felt like the opponent was holding back.

"That...blade...!"

What was even more dangerous was the opponent's weapon.

Amid the darkness, the transparent weapon was hard to see, throwing off her spacing against the curved blade's attacks.

Also, the weapon itself felt like it was enveloped in a malevolent aura. She was certain that it was equipped with some kind of magical ability, but she did not know its nature. Wariness about the blade's abilities dulled Yukina's attacks. Everything put her on the defensive. That left her unable to support Kojou in his difficult battle. Yukina's nervousness pushed her even further into a corner.

Constricted by a horde of those black tentacles, Kojou let out a cry of anguish. "Shit...!"

One slender tentacle was wrapped around his throat, pressing too hard for him to speak further. The pressure on his carotid arteries made his mind hazy.

Pushed to the wall, Kojou heard an unexpected voice reach his ears.

"Kojou! Don't move!"

Breaking through his ever-vaguer consciousness, he could hear Yaze loud and clear.

Wind whipped around him with a roar. The overwhelming air pressure became a blade that sliced past Kojou's neck.

He didn't sense any demonic energy. Compared to the spectacular attacks of the Order of the End, this wind blade was gentler, but it had accurately sliced apart the tentacle wringing Kojou's neck. The severed tentacle dissipated. There was a gap of a single instant before a new tentacle could wrap around Kojou once more.

With fresh blood sent to his brain, Kojou's thinning thoughts gained new clarity.

"C'mon over, Cor-Tauri Succinum!"

The ground before Kojou's feet split apart as a blade of lava burst forth.

This was the second Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor, a giant minotaur with a body made of magma. Its incandescent physique burned the Order of the End's tentacles away, freeing Kojou from their grip.

"Ngh...!"

Wary of the minotaur's roar, the three members of the Order of the End pulled back. However, Kojou's attack did not relent. Blades of magma thrust out of the ground one after another, chasing the figures in the white robes.

To end the Electoral War, he could not allow these three to escape. They were a precious lead linked to The Blood, whose true nature remained unknown.

More than that, the fiendish behavior they had shown Kojou then and there had driven him into a rage.

Responding to Kojou's anger, the minotaur increased the force of its attacks. The scale of the blades of magma increased.

"—Senpai!!"

"What?!"

Yukina's shout, nearly a shriek, made Kojou gasp and come back to his senses.

Suddenly, an explosive gust of wind from above imbued with demonic energy assailed Kojou.

It was a mass of incredible raging wind that felt like a cannon strike. Realizing he could not evade it, Kojou deployed a blade of magma to intercept. Immense demonic energy collided head-on, mutually annihilating each other.

Had Yukina not warned him, Kojou would have surely been crushed helplessly.

"Why, you...!"

Breathing raggedly over and over, Kojou glared deeper into the darkness.

He was grinning as he stood behind the three members of the Order of the End.

He was far smaller than Kojou had imagined. His physique was dainty for boys his age. He had beautiful blond hair that flickered like a rainbow flame.

“The Blood...!” Kojou growled.

The boy kept his eyes closed as he smiled and elegantly bowed his head.

“This is the first time you have directly laid eyes upon me, Kojou Akatsuki. Properly speaking, I would love to have a pleasant chat with you, but it is still too soon. After all, the Electoral War has only just begun.”

His entire body was enveloped in crimson mist imbued with demonic energy. Finally, the mist transformed into a shining, glimmering beast.

“That demonic energy...!” Yukina drew in her breath in fright.

An instinctive fear raced through Kojou as he summoned a new Beast Vassal. He did not have the luxury of any thought of restraint. Moving according to instinct, he indiscriminately unleashed his demonic energy.

“C’mon over, Regulus Aurum!”

“Come forth, Primus Aurum!” The Blood countered as the lightning lion that Kojou summoned transformed into lightning and attacked the boy, who also summoned his own Beast Vassal to intercept. It was a pitch-black lion enveloped by lightning.



Two thunderbolts fiercely collided head-on. Vast heat and shock waves scattered off, devastating the sub-float Kojou and the others were on.

“Ha-ha...ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

The boy’s serene, carefree laughing voice echoed amid the roars of destruction.

Scorched by electrical backlash, Kojou shouted, “The Blood! What the hell are you...?!”

No one would answer him.

The air shuddered, and the artificial ground split open.

Among those scalding, dazzling flashes, the only thing that continued to reverberate was the boy’s beautiful, laughing voice.

CHAPTER TWO
AN ISLAND DIVIDED

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AN ISLAND DIVIDED

1

Countless sparks rained down, illuminating the sky in the dead of night.

The sight seemed less like thunder strikes than as if storm clouds had gathered upon the ground's surface. The collision of vast demonic energy made the air creak, and the artificial ground swayed like a leaf.

The runway made of thick asphalt was breaking as easily as a chocolate bar. Seawater was gushing up through cracks all over the place and drawn into waterspouts. The sub-float had begun to collapse.

"Such dense demonic energy..." Asagi murmured in a daze as she kept looking up, watching the huge Beast Vassals clash.

As facilities on the base were destroyed one after another, the coast guard base building was barely managing to hold together thanks to the barrier Yukina had erected. Wielding her silver spear, she was slicing apart the demonic energy scattering about. Without her barrier, it was beyond doubt that the building Asagi and the others were in would have been vaporized without a trace long before.

However, the demonic energy from the Beast Vassals was simply too vast for Yukina to resist on her own. Plus, her barrier was not enough to fend off the physical effects. She couldn't stop the raging winds and tremors created as side effects of the demonic energy.

The glass windows of the building were already completely shattered, and the ceiling and walls were shaking. The hole in the ceiling widened farther, and the unpleasant sound of something being ripped open echoed forth.

“This is bad... Everyone outside! The building isn’t gonna hold!” Yaze shouted when he sensed disaster unfolding.

“No! No more! Save me! Kojou! Kojou!” Nagisa clutched her head as she sank down on the spot. To her, already a sufferer of demonophobia, seeing two Beast Vassals clashing so close was shocking enough to drive her into a panic.

“Nagisa! No! Stand up, please!” Yaze tried to force the rigid Nagisa up to her feet and drag her with him out of the building. Then he heard a strange sound behind them.

The very foundation supporting the building had caved in, causing part of one wall to collapse. Yaze saw rubble pouring down from overhead, and he froze, unable to even let out a scream.

From the corner of his eye, he then saw a pale glow, typical of spiritual essence. A beautiful barrier reminiscent of a never-melting glacier deployed, forcing the near-collapsed building back.

“Kanase...?!”

“It’s the Svalinn System of the Royal Family of Aldegia...!”

Asagi and Yaze held their breaths as they watched Kanon, her hands clasped as if in prayer.

The Svalinn System, a defensive barrier drawing on spiritual energy, was among the Aldegian Royal Family’s greatest secrets. No one had taught Kanon how to do this; she’d figured out how to reproduce it on her own.

Of course, compared to the proper Svalinn System employed by Princess La Folia, this barrier was far weaker and less stable. Even so, it was sturdy enough to temporarily prevent the building from collapsing.

“Incredible...,” Ugaki breathed out as if it had touched him right in the heart.

The sight of wings of spiritual energy unfolding while Kanon remained in prayer made her truly look like the popular image of a saint. Apparently, even an uncouth, delinquent troll like Ugaki couldn’t help but be in awe at the display.

“Run while we still can! Asagi, hurry!”

“Wait, Kanase’s...!” Asagi was going to shout back in anger when Kanon vanished from before her very eyes. Rubble falling from overhead had obscured Asagi’s vision. “Kanase...?!”

“Nooooooooooo!” Nagisa shrieked.

Asagi stood stiff amid the falling rubble. A spiritual energy barrier was protecting her entire body. Had it not, she might have died.

“The barrier’s intact! Kanase’s safe!” Yaze exclaimed with a hoarse voice, spurring Asagi on to flee.

Virtually simultaneously, the barrier that had been protecting Asagi vanished. The building made sounds of collapse behind her, but Asagi didn’t have any time to look back. Huge cracks were running under her feet.

The Fourth Primogenitor’s Beast Vassal and the unfamiliar but similar Beast Vassal had vanished. However, their clash had already inflicted serious damage upon the sub-float’s underpinnings. Its surface was breaking apart like thin ice spread over a lake, turning into multiple fragments that were being split up by the ferocious waves atop the sea. Having lost their buoyancy, portions of the fragments were already beginning to sink.

At some point, she’d lost sight of even Yaze and Nagisa. Asagi was aboard a fragment in a different place, adrift on the surface of the sea. As she tried to search for them, a sight made her recoil, eyes wide.

She had spotted Yukina on top of a sinking fragment of the artificial isle.

Perhaps Yukina’s heavy use of spiritual energy had depleted her strength. She had fallen in a heap, unable to move. If Asagi didn’t do something, it was plain that she would sink along with the fragment into the sea.

“Aw, geez!”

Asagi broke into a run before she could think.

Asagi ran toward the nearly two-meter chasm separating where she was from the fragment Yukina was atop. If she didn’t jump over it, she wouldn’t be able to reach Yukina. Naturally, if she slipped upon landing, she would fall into the sea. However, the gap was gradually growing larger. There was no time for

hesitation.

“Himeragi!”

Asagi barely managed to make the jump. She caught Yukina’s right hand just as the Sword Shaman was about to slide down perilously close to the water’s surface.

As soon as Asagi let out a sigh of relief, she heard a destructive sound at her feet. The impact of Asagi’s landing had caused some portion supporting the artificial isle fragment to snap.

“N...no way?!”

The tilting artificial isle fragment turned nearly vertical all at once. Asagi, still clutching Yukina, was helplessly hurled into the sea.

2

Asagi heaved ragged breaths as she floated on the choppy surface of the ocean. She was still clutching Yukina against her chest.

Maybe it was Yukina’s instincts as an Attack Mage, but even unconscious, she refused to let go of her silver spear. That was part of why it was tremendously difficult for Asagi to keep swimming while continuing to hold her. It was all she could do to prop Yukina up and keep her from drowning.

“This is completely messed up...!” Asagi yelled at the top of her lungs.

Fortunately, the raging winds whipped up by the clash of Beast Vassals were finally starting to abate. The roiling waves were not completely merciless. The problem was that the fragments of the destroyed sub-float were beginning to sink one after the other. If their descent created a whirlpool, Asagi and Yukina didn’t stand a chance.

Asagi was buffeted by the waves when, all of a sudden, she heard a synthetic, somehow sarcastic-sounding voice in her ear.

“Heh-heh... Seems you’re in a fair bit of distress, li’l miss.”

The voice was coming from Asagi’s smartwatch, which was linked to her

smartphone. Surprised by the oddly nostalgic voice, Asagi angrily shouted back, “Mogwai?! How did you...?!”

“We’ll talk later. We don’t have time for a leisurely chat, you know,” Mogwai teased.

Asagi spat out the seawater that’d gotten into her mouth as she grudgingly nodded. “Yeah. For starters, could you do something about this situation?”

She didn’t have the luxury of getting her smartphone out while swimming with Yukina in her arms. Asagi tapped the touch panel of her smartwatch to summon up a self-written application recorded within.

Asagi could not employ magic except for one exception—the forbidden spell known as The Cleansing.

Properly speaking, The Cleansing was not a spell, forbidden or otherwise. It was the ultimate cheat code, directly altering the God Program that was the driving force behind the world.

Through use of the processing device named Itogami Island, designed as the altar for The Cleansing, Asagi could employ her off-the-charts abilities as the Priestess of Cain to change the God Program. In other words, she could rewrite reality.

All that said, even with Asagi’s abilities, it was difficult to control The Cleansing in real time, especially in a situation where she couldn’t properly control a smartphone, let alone a regular computer.

That didn’t mean she was unable to do anything at all. What Asagi had activated with her smartwatch was a ritual macro she’d finished programming beforehand. She couldn’t finely control things with it, but if it was just transforming a single batch of targeted objects, the fiendish thing could execute it with a single click.

“I would’ve slapped together a more proper macro if I’d known I’d be in a tough spot...!” Asagi sighed deeply as the vermilion particles characteristic of The Cleansing swirled around her.

When the particles dispersed, the sea around Asagi began to shine. The fierce rolling waves slowed, almost like a film in slow motion, before they eventually

stopped completely.

However, this was not because the ocean had frozen. Upon closer observation, the transparent surface of the sea was making tiny little jiggles.

It looked almost like faintly red gelatin. No, it looked exactly like gelatin.

It was a giant piece of strawberry gelatin reaching six hundred meters in diameter; Asagi had turned the entirety of the seawater surrounding her into an edible treat.

This was to prevent the still-unconscious Yukina, Asagi herself, and the Rogues Alliance subjects who had fallen into the sea from drowning. She hadn't had any other usable macros on hand.

"Heh-heh, come to think of it, when you were writing this program, you were eating a gelatin cup in a hurry while you worked, huh?"

"I was soooo right not to make it pudding...," Asagi murmured weakly as she crawled up, pushing her way through the seawater-turned-gelatin.

Thanks to gelatin having firmness and elasticity, it sat on top of the water, but things would not have gone so well if it had been soft pudding instead. Such a blunder, and she might well have sunken into a bottomless swamp, drowning in a sea of pudding, her corpse a laughingstock the world over.

Heavy metals and concrete would fall to the bottom of the gelatin, but comparatively light human beings would not sink. At the very least, the danger of drowning had passed. The crisis at hand had been overcome.

"That said, it's still just gelatin. Won't it dissolve when the temperature rises after daybreak? It's best for your sake to run while the running's good, li'l miss."

"I don't need you to tell me that. It's a good thing Himeragi's so light."

Standing up as she carried the unconscious Yukina on her back, Asagi slowly surveyed the surrounding area.

On her right was the wreckage of the partly destroyed sub-float, having lost about half of its original mass. Farther to her left, she could see Itogami Island proper. Asagi was smack in the middle of both. They'd apparently been carried a fair way since falling into the sea.

After a moment's hesitation, Asagi began walking to the left.

She was concerned for Kojou and Yaze, but the Rogues Alliance remnants were prowling around the ruined sub-float. Her immediate concern was for Yukina's safety.

Mogwai was two steps ahead of Asagi. *"About ninety meters straight ahead is the broken connecting bridge. Climb up that, and you should be able to get into Island South."*

It was using Itogami Island's City Management System to obtain visuals of the area and Asagi's location data. Just because the Order of the End had taken over didn't mean that the City Management System had ceased functioning altogether.

"Are Motoki and the others all right?"

Mogwai's reply was blunt. *"Unfortunately, I can't confirm that as I am now."*

Asagi glared with annoyance at the tiny screen on her smartwatch. "Where the hell have you been?! You should've gotten in touch sooner if it was safe!"

"Unfortunately, that just wasn't in the cards."

"Why not?!"

"Domains."

"Huh...?"

"Currently, Itogami Island proper has been divided into eighty-one domains in all. Each one has a ruler with effective rule over that territory—or rather, it's more accurate to say those with a domain's right to rule are being referred to as rulers."

"...What do you mean? What is this right to rule thing?" Asagi asked, perplexed.

The badly sewn teddy bear avatar grinned with amusement as it replied, *"I'm saying, it's the right to rule a domain. All right, to make it easier for the li'l miss to understand, think of it as the right to monopolize control of Itogami Island's City Management System, including power, gas, water, security cameras, radio transmission—the whole works, but only one part out of eighty-one thereof."*

“They’re dividing it up? There’s no way anyone can do that.”

Mogwai was mystified at her exasperated retort. It tilted its head. *“You sure about that?”*

“Duh. It isn’t a cookie. If you split the City Management System into two, the system load would double, so that’s impossible. And if some domain was using excess water and power, there obviously wouldn’t be enough for other domains.”

“Well, if you don’t have enough, why not just take it from someone else?”

“Huh?! What are you saying? That’s almost like—”

“War?”

“...Oh. So that’s how this whole Electoral War works.” Asagi ruefully bit her lip.

The ruler candidates weren’t expanding their territories out of simple sport. They were fighting over resources—the supplies necessary for day-to-day life.

Mogwai’s tone abruptly turned serious. *“Incidentally, rulers monopolizing the City Management System means that subjects defying the ruler don’t get their rations of food and water. If they don’t like it, they can get under some other ruler’s control. Failing that, they give the ruler they don’t like a beating and become the leader themselves.”*

Asagi glared at her partner with half-lidded eyes. “Guess they wanna make Itogami Island’s residents fight one another no matter what. That’s some pretty sick stuff. Why are you carrying out a plan like this?”

“Hey, hey, li’l miss, my physical body’s just a computer system, y’know? If the system administrator gives the order, it has to be faithfully obeyed, right?”

“So how did you come crawling out of the woodwork now?”

“Since the boss of the Rogues Alliance got beat, the domain doesn’t have a ruler anymore. That means I can temporarily move freely, but only one eighty-first of me.”

“So the power of The Cleansing I used was only one eighty-first of the real deal, too.”

Asagi sullenly raised an eyebrow, giving the sea surface beneath her feet a light kick.

The jellified sea only spread as far as the sub-float's southern coast. The Cleansing's effect had stopped midway into the sea as if it'd struck an invisible wall. This was why there was no way to cross over to Itogami Island proper except by using the connecting bridge. That cutoff point was probably the domain's border. If she crossed that, her contact with Mogwai would be interrupted once more, rendering her unable to use The Cleansing.

"Wait. Then what happens if someone rules all eighty-one domains?"

"That person becomes Itogami Island's new ruler. Of course, I'll miss, if one of your friends takes all the domains, then this stupid fuss ends in an instant."

"If we can believe what The Blood says, that is." Asagi couldn't help feeling suspicious of the whole ordeal. Mogwai didn't refute it, either.

"Well, you have a point."

The Blood and the Order of the End had written the rules for this dispute arbitrarily. There was no guarantee that they wouldn't go back on their word at the last second.

Even so, Asagi and the others were left with no alternative but to make use of those rules at present. Whining about the handicaps they'd been given wouldn't change anything. It was a game that began with them at an overwhelming disadvantage.

"So how is the ruler decided?"

"It's the demon who gathers together the most pacts with subjects in a given domain."

"Pacts... Those magic circle-ish thingies?"

Asagi recalled the spell symbols inscribed on Ugaki's underlings. Not being a sorceress, Asagi had a poor understanding of the principles by which they operated.

Mogwai spoke in an exceptionally businesslike tone. *"It ain't like you need to meet people one-on-one to get their stamps of approval. If a domain's subjects*

recognize you as their figurehead, the pact is complete.”

Asagi’s face turned grave as she asked another question. “And if there are multiple candidates in the same domain?”

“They fight one another, and the one who wins inherits the opponent’s subjects.”

“I see... That’s what Ugaki said.” Asagi sighed wearily.

Ruler candidates clashed together and stole subjects from one another. Victory was the fastest way for a candidate to increase the number of their subjects. The more numerous their subjects became, the greater the demonic energy available to the candidate, and no doubt the greater the damage and casualties their fighting brought as well. This was a war enveloping Itogami Island’s entire population.

Mogwai continued its explanation. *“To become a ruler, the subjects have to know the candidate’s identity. Well, at the very least, they have to know their name.”*

“The hell...? That’s...”

The chill Asagi felt up her spine brought her feet to a halt.

The conditions were not particularly strange. Magically speaking, revealing one’s identity was standard for pacts.

But it also meant that so long as Kojou Akatsuki continued to conceal his identity, he could not become a ruler. Kojou had only one way of putting the Electoral War to rest—naming himself the true Fourth Primogenitor and becoming the true ruler of Itogami Island.

Did all of the rules of the Electoral War exist to drag the existence of Kojou Akatsuki out onto the public stage?

Asagi vehemently shook her head as if to brush such foolish notions aside.

At that moment, the image of Mogwai on her smartwatch suddenly became garbled. *“Sorry, li’l miss. It seems I can’t lend you a hand any further.”*

“Huh?! Why not?!” Asagi glared at Mogwai.

The jellified sea surface continued ahead for a little while longer. This should have still been an area where it was possible to communicate with her AI partner.

The badly sewn teddy bear avatar shook its head. *“That’s because the sub-float’s been completely destroyed. This domain’s been scrapped, and its domain number is being inherited by another area. So this is where you and I go separate ways for a while, li’l miss... Do be...well until we...et again.....n’t die.”*

“Mogwai! Wait a—Mogwai! We’re in the middle of a conversation!” Asagi stubbornly called out to her smartwatch, but the only thing hovering on its screen was the callous out-of-area indicator.

She had no time to lose heart over that, though. As Mogwai vanished, a huge crack ran across the jellified surface of the sea.

“Geh...?!”

The huge sea of gelatin was splitting apart. Asagi went pale when she realized this.

The effect of The Cleansing that Asagi had used hadn’t expired. The Cleansing was a forbidden spell that rewrote the world itself. Matter that had been transformed did not automatically revert to its former state.

However, once the transformation was complete, the object was affected by the normal laws of physics. Heat gelatin and it melted; apply enough force and you tore it apart. It was breaking down from the effects of the waves as time passed. The phenomenon was occurring before Asagi’s very eyes.

If she had Mogwai with her, she could have utilized The Cleansing once more to mend it, but the AI had already vanished. The only thing Asagi could do at that point was sprint to her destination, the connecting bridge, with Yukina on her back.

Asagi sweated bullets as she desperately made a run for it. The gelatin broke apart as it floated on the water. It was the worst of all possible footings.

Midway she tumbled and crawled on all fours, finally using Yukina’s spear in place of a walking stick as she climbed up a slippery slope. She didn’t care what it looked like. Yukina’s supposedly light body weight was pressing heavily on her

shoulders. It was like some kind of horrid game show.

By the end, Asagi was on the verge of collapse when she climbed onto the half-wrecked connecting bridge. The tip of the bridge had sunk into the sea at an incline, making it possible to go up on foot.

Asagi stumbled forward from her momentum, tumbling on the spot.

Fortunately, the bridge's surface being wet minimized the damage. Her body, accustomed to jiggly gelatin, found the hard asphalt surface downright pleasant.

"Haaah...haaah... Somehow made it in time... I was sure I was a...goner...this time..."

Asagi gazed at the broken pieces of jellified sea surface being carried off by the waves as she tried to catch her breath.

If she'd been even a little slower in reaching the connecting bridge, she would have been drowning in the sea once more. She didn't think she could swim carrying Yukina with her endurance depleted as it was. She really had escaped by the skin of her teeth.

Gently putting the sleeping Yukina and her spear atop the roadway, Asagi collapsed to join them.

Her entire gelatin-smeared body smelled of strawberry. Her hair and clothes were all a mess. She really didn't want to be in front of people looking like that.

The conditions were identical for Yukina, but in her case, she appeared fleetingly lovely even like that. *There's something really unfair about this*, Asagi complained inside her own mind.

However, Yukina's entire body was cold, and her cheeks had lost their complexion. This was no doubt from having used far too much spiritual energy. Small wonder—she'd fended off the demonic energy from two primogenitor-class Beast Vassals all by herself.

At least her breathing was stable, but Asagi was worried about leaving her in that state. *I have to get her to a safe place*, thought Asagi as she prodded her tired body to rise.

Then she sensed someone close by.

“—?!”

The malignant aura, enough to make one shudder, made Asagi reflexively spin about.

A figure clad in a pure-white robe appeared, practically melting in from the gloom, head covered in a creepy-looking mask patterned after a human skull. She heard a voice from beneath the mask.

“Asagi Aiba... The Priestess of Cain...”

“Order of the End...!”

Asagi went on guard, spurred by instinctive fear. Her right hand touched the smartphone in her pocket. Her water-resistant smartphone was functioning just fine even after being immersed in water, but she still couldn’t reach Mogwai. Unable to activate The Cleansing, Asagi was nothing more than the powerless schoolgirl she looked like.

However, even in that state, the Order of the End acolyte trained merciless enmity on Asagi. It was such powerful demonic energy that even Asagi, who lacked spiritual power, could sense it keenly.

“Your existence is dangerous to our plan... Accordingly...”

“Y...you’re kidding me...”

Asagi took a step back, unable to endure the demonic energy blowing her way.

Something squishy wrapped around her left ankle. This was a black, slimy, gleaming tentacle.

Tentacles spewed from the bottom of the white robe, stretching toward Asagi one after another. They were attempting to drag Asagi into the robe’s interior.

“Wah, gross...! Wait a—Cut it o—Stay back!”

Asagi was on her butt as she desperately tried to kick the tentacles away; such resistance was meaningless. In the blink of an eye, both of her legs were held fast, stopping her from moving.

The hem of the robe rose up. Spreading within was pitch-black darkness.

This was likely a gate for teleportation purposes. The tentacles that had appeared from there were trying to return to the other side of the gate once more, still entwined around Asagi's legs.

The acolyte of the Order of the End made a tiny groan. "Ngh...!"

A silver streak raced like a flash of lightning, and the horde of tentacles trying to drag Asagi into the gate were sent flying. They had been severed by a razor-sharp object.

With agile movements that betrayed no hint of the effects of gravity, a small-statured girl landed before Asagi's eyes. She was gripping a fully metallic silver spear.

"Himeragi?!"

"I'm sorry, Aiba. I'm all right now."

Yukina turned her spear toward the Order of the End acolyte. However, the complexion of her face remained pale. She'd probably only just regained consciousness in reaction to the tentacle wielder's demonic energy. She had to be a far cry from her usual physical condition.

"Yukina...Himeragiii!" the tentacle wielder howled. The demonic energy swelled further as a horde of countless tentacles assaulted Yukina all at once.

"I, Maiden of the Lion, Sword Shaman of the High God, beseech thee."

Yukina made no attempt to evade the horde of tentacles bearing down on her. Honing the little spiritual energy left within her, she kept her spear poised as she wove an incantation. The silver spear shone with a pale light as an aura of tranquility embraced her.

"O purifying light, O divine wolf of the snowdrift, by your steel divine will, strike down the devils before me!"

Yukina kicked off the ground into a sprint.

The Divine Oscillation Effect barrier shrouding her impeded the summoned tentacles, sending them flying in pieces.

The tentacle wielder's body recoiled, seemingly shirking in terror, flesh melting into thin air. This was instant movement through spatial control magic.

Nonetheless, Yukina's attack came before the tentacle wielder could completely vanish from sight. The gate for teleportation was sundered via Snowdrift Wolf's demonic energy nullification ability, causing the tentacle wielder's body to reappear in a place a paltry few meters away.

With a crisp sound like a porcelain cup snapping, something fell down to the tentacle wielder's feet.

This was a portion of the mask. The skull-motif mask had split, exposing the tentacle wielder's face. Yukina's spear had rent the pure-white robe, cleanly bisecting the mask underneath the hood.

"You're..." Yukina's voice shook with surprise. "...a girl?!"

Asagi's eyes went wide with shock.

The acolyte of the Order of the End, the tentacle wielder—her bare face was that of a youthful girl. She had pitch-black hair, white skin, and beautiful red eyes.

"So you have seen...my filthy flesh..."

The girl covered the side of her face as if ashamed, glaring at Yukina and Asagi through the gaps in her fingers.

The next instant, a gate activated once more, and this time the girl vanished into the darkness.

"We're...saved?"

Asagi remained seated on the ground as she murmured weakly.

Her clothes were torn all over, and there were abrasions showing on her arms and legs. That she'd escaped so lightly was no doubt unbelievably good fortune. She could well have been killed.

"Aiba. What happened...?"

Yukina lowered the spear in her hands as she posed the question with an expression of concern. Thanks to being out cold the whole time, she couldn't

have even known where she was.

Asagi wobbled as she rose to her feet. “Right. I wonder where to even begin...”

Though they’d somehow managed to shake off the Order of the End’s pursuit, nothing had been brought to an end. The Electoral War was continuing somewhere on Itogami Island even that very moment. Kojou and the others they’d been split from were on her mind, too. She needed to pass on her information from Mogwai to Yukina and come up with countermeasures as soon as possible.

“First, I want a bath. My whole body’s slimy... Ugh, this really sucks,” Asagi said, smiling but exhausted.

The faint sun began to shine upon the side of her marred face. Daybreak was approaching.

3

The shoulders of the little girl, her back arched like a kitten’s, trembled as she awoke.

Upon seeing this, Motoki Yaze’s face softened with an expression of relief.

It was an underground passage hazily lit by the glow of emergency lighting.

In that dry, artificial space, the effects of the collision of Beast Vassals were nowhere to be felt.

Just before the sub-float collapsed, Yaze moved to Itogami Island proper with the girl in tow. He’d leaped across the canal separating the two artificial isles.

The Yaze family line was one of hereditary psychics known as Hyper Adapters. Yaze himself was one of those natural-born psychics. His main abilities were powers to control gases and molecular motion.

Normally, it was a weak power that could only be used for eavesdropping, but if he set aside his subconscious limiter, he could freely manipulate the flow of the wind. Yaze had succeeded in using the raging winds kicked up by Kojou and

company to make an enormous leap of nearly forty meters. If he hadn't used an underhanded trick like that, he had no doubt escaping with a fainted girl along for the ride would have been impossible.

"Hey, Nagisa. Awake already?"

"Yazecchi...?"

The just-awakened Nagisa Akatsuki slowly lifted her head, looking around the area suspiciously. Then, the girl's lips suddenly stiffened. The clash of two Beast Vassals, the collapse of the sub-float—those were fresh in her mind.

"Where are we? And Kojou?! What about Asagi and Yukina and Kanon...?!"

"No use worryin' about Kojou," Yaze responded confidently and without hesitation. "That ain't anywhere near enough to kill the likes of him. I mean, his Beast Vassal didn't go berserk, and that The Blood guy wasn't serious this time, either."

In reality, Yaze wasn't nearly as certain of that as his words would imply. Kojou being safe was nothing more than Yaze's own deduction. Still, his hypothesis that The Blood had not been serious was probably right.

If he'd really wanted to eliminate Kojou, he wouldn't have needed to go through the trouble of putting together the stupid event he was calling an *Electoral War*.

Having Kojou participate was convenient for turning it into an even bigger spectacle. That was why The Blood had gone out of his way to reveal himself before Kojou. Showing off his own power and cruelty, he thereby backed Kojou into a corner, involving him regardless of whether Kojou liked it. It was all to provoke Kojou.

"...And the others?"

"If Kojou's alive, well, the others are probably fine, too. If anything, from all of us there, the biggest scrubs were you and me, Nagisa."

Yaze's self-defacing frivolity brought an awkward smile to Nagisa's face. "Yeah... Yeah, you're right. Yukina, Kanon, and Asagi are all strong."

"See? So we have to make sure we don't slow 'em down at least."

“I suppose you’re right. Sorry, Yazecchi... Because I went into a panic...” Nagisa’s shoulders drooped. She no doubt remembered herself hyperventilating earlier.

Don’t worry about it went Yaze’s shake of his hand. “No, no. That’s the reaction any normal girl should have. Asagi and the others just have nerves of steel, that’s all.”

“But...!” Nagisa quickly rose to her feet. There was a dull *gong* noise coming from the top of her head. “Ouch... What is this?”

Clutching her head with both hands, Nagisa looked up with tearful eyes. There rested a PVC pipeline. It was already a low underground passage without the multiple pipes and cables running in a tidy row close to the ceiling.

“Those are probably gas pipes. This is an underground passage for city utility maintenance. The ceiling’s low, so it’s tough to walk through, but hey, it’s a lot safer than trying to move around topside.”

“But where does it go? Do you have a map?” she asked, concerned as she squinted down the dimly lit passage.

Yaze looked a little proud of himself as he pointed at his own temple. “I have most of the layout stuffed in here.”

“Whoa! That’s amazing, Yazecchi! I think you’re cool for the first time ever!”

“First time ever?!” Nagisa’s all-too-blunt praise brought an expression of dismay over Yaze. “Well, that’s fine and all. I have an older girlfriend and everything.”

“...You actually have a girlfriend? She’s not just a figment of your imagination?” Nagisa asked, full of doubt.

“Yes, she really exists!” Yaze shot back. Then, in a voice too low for her to hear, he added, “If she’s alive, that is.”

He didn’t think Koyomi Shizuka, one of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency, would sit back and watch as the Order of the End and The Blood carried out their misdeeds, but Keystone Gate had been wrecked and Itogami Island’s City Management System had been hijacked. There was only one possibility he

could think of—even Koyomi had been unable to defeat The Blood.

The safety of his defeated girlfriend weighed on his mind, but at present Yaze had no way to find out what had happened to her. Ensuring Nagisa Akatsuki's safety had to come first.

"Nagisa, how are you feeling? Can you walk?"

"Yeah. I'm fine, but—"

Nagisa looked down at her body to check for wounds. There were no obvious injuries apparent to the eye, though she had bumped the top of her head earlier.

And yet, Nagisa grimaced when she noticed the scent of blood hovering around her. Her already large eyes became larger still when she noticed a smear of blood on Yaze's shirt spreading outward.

"Yazecchi? What's with that cut?!"

"Ahh, this? A little thing happened when some leftovers from the Rogues Alliance caught up in the middle of our running away."

Yaze made a pained smile as he pressed a hand on his left shoulder. It was a wound from a beast person's claw attack. It had breached his air pressure defenses and gouged him from his shoulder blade all the way down to his hip.

Fortunately, it had missed his vitals, but he was still bleeding at that very moment. That was why Yaze was hiding in an underground passage rather than being on the move.

"Don't tell me that's because you were carrying me...?" Nagisa asked in a fearful tone of voice.

Yaze fervently shook his head. "No, no. Apparently that bunch mistook us for being pals of the Order of the End, so it's not your fault. If anything, it's entirely possible they let me go because I was carrying you." He forced himself to his feet.

"...Yazecchi, wait." Nagisa's tone was serious. Hovering in her eyes was a look of determination that concealed the worry in them.

"Huh?"

“Take off your clothes.”

“...M-my clothes?”

When Nagisa grasped the hem of his shirt, Yaze hesitated. *Aw crap* went the shake of his head as he put a hand on the belt of his pants.

“No, no. I’m grateful you want to thank me, but this is bad, ’kay? I have a girlfriend I love, and having Kojou calling me brother-in-law would be kinda...”

“What are you talking about? Um...and why are you loosening your belt? I meant take off your shirt! I’m going to treat your wound!”

“O-oh...?”

With Nagisa scornfully glaring at him, Yaze politely did as she told him. Grimacing from the pain he’d been concealing, he stripped off his bloody shirt.

“But how...? Even if you wanna stop the bleeding, it’s too much of an area to cover, right?”

“Never mind that. Show me your back. This might hurt a little but try to endure it.”

Yaze sat then and there as Nagisa touched a hand to his back. She did not flinch whatsoever from the bleeding wound as she closed her eyes and regulated her breathing.

Nagisa slid her fingertip along Yaze’s back. Yaze scowled from powerful pain. Incredible spiritual energy was flowing into Yaze through his back.

“This is...a healing ritual...?! How do you know how to...?!” Yaze’s voice was shrill from the pain.

“I learned it. From Mimori. Way back in elementary school,” Nagisa answered. She was too focused on what she was doing to be able to hold much of a conversation.

“I see... Mimori’s a physician with her own Adaptation, right.”

Yaze murmured in apparent comprehension.

Mimori Akatsuki, mother of the Akatsuki siblings, was a sorcerous physician working at the medical branch of the giant conglomerate Magna Ataraxia

Research. As rumor would have it, she was a medical psychometrist with considerable successes under her belt.

Yaze had also received intel that Nagisa had inherited this ability from her mother. However, this was the first time he'd actually seen her use it in person.

Nagisa didn't sound very confident. "Yeah. Also, I learned a little about ritual healing from my grandmother. I only know the basics, though, so don't expect it to work too well. I learned it because Kojou was always getting hurt when he was a kid."

Quietly, Yaze mentally curled his tongue. Nagisa's grandmother, Hisano Akatsuki, was one of Japan's top spiritualists. In other words, Nagisa was one of the precious few Hyper Adapters able to use both psychic and spiritual energy.

That was why Nagisa's healing ritual was this powerful despite Nagisa's skills being rough.

"...That so? Gotta give Kojou my thanks, too, then."

Yaze spoke glibly as he endured the ceaseless pain. However, Nagisa nervously raised her eyebrows.

"You mustn't. Don't say one word to Kojou about this."

"Why not? I think he'd be happy. He really loves his little sister and all."

"That's exactly why! It'll really bother Kojou if he knew he put the healing ritual I learned to waste. I mean, because he became a vampire and everything..."

"Ah...well, got a point there," Yaze agreed.

Having turned into a vampire primogenitor, Kojou had regenerative abilities that made him nigh immortal. The healing ritual Nagisa had learned no longer held any meaning for him.

Kojou would no doubt be saddened to learn that. He would not lament becoming a demon, but rather having made his little sister's hard work futile. It was because Nagisa understood this that she'd hidden her own ability.

But that was the same thing Kojou had once done. He had hidden his having become a vampire for the sake of one person—his demonophobic little sister.

“Wait a—Yazecchi, why are you laughing?” Nagisa puffed up her cheeks in dismay.

Yaze silently shrugged. His muscles and tendons felt a little on the tight side, but he no longer felt any pain. Yaze’s wound had largely healed over in less than fifteen minutes.

“Amazing. Thanks so much. I’ll hold together a little while longer.”

“I’m so glad...”

Nagisa patted her chest as she saw Yaze was back to his old self. Her breaths were a little shallow due to using an unfamiliar ritual, but it didn’t seem to have drained her endurance any. By rights, Nagisa had spirit energy of sufficient strength to internalize even Aurora’s artificial vampire soul, so this had to be a piece of cake for her.

“So what’ll we do from here?”

Yaze explained his plan while putting his arms through the sleeves of his torn shirt. “Good question. First, I think we should head to the nearest Island Guard station. I’d like to find Kojou and the others, but it’s dangerous for us to wander around by ourselves, so—”

Suddenly, his words broke off midway. Yaze sank into silence, the gravity on his face increasing as she watched.

“...Yazecchi?”

“Not good. They followed us.”

“By ‘they,’ you mean...”

“Yeah. Survivors from Rogues Alliance.”

Nagisa’s expression stiffened. “But I don’t hear anything...”

“It’s ‘cause my ears are special. Call it the boon of a bottom-feeder. Let’s hurry.” Yaze led Nagisa by the hand and set off in a rapid walk.

The underground passage’s ceiling was pretty low for someone tall like Yaze to go walking around, but complaining wouldn’t change anything.

Around four beast people had crept into the underground passage. He was

pretty darned sure they were Rogues Alliance scrubs. They'd apparently noticed the entrance to the passage while following Yaze's trail of blood.

Fortunately, thanks to Nagisa's healing ritual, Yaze's bleeding had already stopped. Yaze's ability allowed him to erase the echo of their footsteps in the underground passage as well.

However, he didn't think the beast people had broken off their pursuit. Amid the labyrinth-like network of underground passageways, they were pursuing the shortest route without the slightest hesitation.

"So they're tracking us by scent? Shit...!"

Nervousness came over Yaze. At this rate, it was only a matter of time until the pursuers caught up.

Nagisa took notice of how he was short of breath. "Yazecchi...if you push yourself, your wound will...!"

Ritual healing was first aid at best. It didn't recover the person's endurance or blood loss, and there was no guarantee that a just-closed wound would not reopen.

On top of that, Yaze and Nagisa's pursuers boasted endurance far above that of human beings. With both of them worn down, the chances of a clean escape were slim.

"Sink or swim, huh? Let's go topside. Better than being backed into a corner in a place like this."

"...Got it." Nagisa nodded.

Yaze used his ability to leave decoy footprints as he headed toward the underground passage's exit. He climbed a metallic ladder and opened the lid of a manhole cover. He felt a sharp pain in his back again, but the situation didn't allow him to cry about that.

When he crawled to the surface, Yaze's eyes blinked and went wide.

This was because the state of things around Yaze was a far cry from the Itogami Island landscape he knew.

There were beds of meticulously maintained flowers in full bloom. There was

a mysterious, unfamiliar lane lined with trees.

The buildings were all light pastel colors, and the vibrant street was packed with multicolored tiles.

The site's streetlights and signs were decorated with elaborate carvings, engendering a fanciful atmosphere like something straight out of a fairy tale. It looked like a theme park catering to children or perhaps an educational facility. It was an odd place.

"...Where the heck is this?"

Even while perplexed by the strange sight, Yaze gave Nagisa a hand, pulling her up to ground level. Unsurprisingly, Nagisa too was shocked by the surrounding sights hitting her in the face, but that expression immediately grew stiff.

Seven figures with spiked outfits completely unsuited to the fanciful scene emerged from the shadows of the buildings and surrounded Yaze and Nagisa.

"Yazecchi!"

"Dammit... The scrubs below were a diversion to drive us up here...!"

Yaze groaned as he noticed the flurry of noise leaking up from a subterranean ventilation shaft. This was high-frequency sound largely undetectable to the ears of human beings. These were actually howls the beast people were using to communicate with one another. They'd been using the sounds to coordinate with their pals on the surface. That was how they'd lured Yaze and Nagisa into their net.

"Aaaaaah!"

Nagisa let out a shriek of fright when a beast person dropping from a treetop ripped her jacket apart.

"You bastard!"

Yaze swallowed a pill to boost his abilities and attacked the foe assaulting Nagisa.

He used an invisible blade created from the air itself. It wasn't an ability with great destructive power, but it nonetheless had enough force to rend a beast

person's resilient hide with ease.

With both arms exposed and his face torn up, the beast man wobbled back, but this only served to drive his comrades into an even greater frenzy.

"You braaaaat! How dare you do that to one of ours!"

"For an Ugaki bootlicker, you sure got us good, huuuh?!"

"Revenge for the boss—kill 'immmm!"

Angry voices scattered from the infuriated beast people as they bore down toward Yaze.

Yaze groaned in despair. His airflow control abilities weren't geared for close combat. At this range, he couldn't even use Aerodyne, the ace up his sleeve. Shoving Nagisa behind him to shield her, Yaze indiscriminately released blades of air, resigned to his own demise.

A particularly large booming sound reverberated all around them.

"Guaaaaaaah!!"

"Gaaaah!!"

Countless sparks scattered across the lane packed with colorful tiles.

Fresh blood spewed from the beast people's legs as they were sent flying.

It was burst fire from an antipersonnel machine gun. Bathed in gunfire from an unexpected direction, the Rogues Alliance remnants fell into a panic.

Yaze was speechless as he gazed at the spectacle. He didn't know what was going on.

"Thou art contemptible villains to raise a hand toward a frail maiden."

The lines Yaze heard from overhead were theatrically old-fashioned.

A machine like a giant tortoise appeared, looming from atop one of the pastel-colored buildings. It was an anti-demon personal weapon—a Micro Robot Tank painted crimson.

A beast person covered his wounds with both hands and shot a glare at the machine overhead. "What the hell's your problem?!"

The answer to this question came from a youthful but frigid voice belonging to a diminutive figure standing on the tank's round back. She was a little girl wearing the uniform of a famed elementary school and a beret upon her head.

"You people are quite rude, trampling upon someone else's domain only to ask what our problem is."

The beast people's feet shifted restlessly when they noticed her presence.

"Someone else's...domain?"

"Tensou Academy...! This is bad; the ruler here... Oh no...!"

Wings spread from the girl's back before the beast people finished their words—jet-black wings woven from demonic energy.

This served as the signal for a horde of dozens of demon beasts to emerge from behind her.

Harpies, hellhounds, vargheists, mythical apes called zhuyan—all were fiendish demon beasts that absolutely never grew attached to human beings. Yet, these demon beasts, precious few in number and raised by Itogami Island corporations purely for lab purposes, served this girl.

"The World's Mightiest Succubus...! Lilith!"

The Rogues Alliance remnants let out a terrified shriek.

Their wounded bodies were practically crawling as they began to flee. Yaze and Nagisa felt incredulous as they watched the bunch pathetically turn tail and leave.

Obedying an unspoken command from the girl spreading pitch-black wings forth, the demon beasts left for parts unknown.

The nature of the buildings around Yaze came to him. This was a school constructed according to the difficult-to-grasp refined tastes of a famous architect from overseas. Yaze and Nagisa had blundered their way into one of a handful of renowned private elementary schools within Itogami City.

Yaze and Nagisa stood in a daze as the girl with the beret fluttered down before them.

“So you’re...the ruler of this domain...?” Yaze asked, surprised.

“Yume...!” Nagisa called out.

“It has been some time, Nagisa. Also, Mr. Spiky Hair.”

The succubus girl, Yume Eguchi, bowed meticulously as she greeted Nagisa before pointing at the building behind her as she spoke with pride.

“Welcome to Tensou Academy.”

4

A pungent scent pricking at the nose and white steam gushed up from the melted asphalt.

It was the runway strip at the coast guard base. Kojou was standing alone at the blast site where the two Beast Vassals had clashed. The rows of buildings and equipment nearby had collapsed, leaving nothing behind save their ruins.

The acolytes of the Order of the End and the boy claiming to be The Blood had vanished along with the beast people of the Rogues Alliance. Kojou was the only ambulatory person in the place.

“Himeragi, where are you?!” Kojou yelled as he meandered about the rubble.

The heavily damaged sub-float had divided into several units, and many of them had begun to sink. The unit connected to the blast site was still intact, but he didn’t know how long it would hold together.

His voice became hoarse as he continued to yell. “Yaze! Asagi! Nagisa! Kanase! Answer, someone! Please!”

The damage was greater in the surrounding areas than near to the blast site, where the two Beast Vassals had canceled out each other’s demonic energy. In particular, the damage to the coast guard station that had sustained the brunt of the raging winds was severe. The cheaply made building had completely collapsed, for the most part simply pushed beyond its limits.

Unease racked Kojou as he approached the remains of the structure.

He unwittingly brought his feet to a halt due to the sweetness hovering in the

air around him. It was an artificial yet somehow nostalgic scent.

“What is this smell...? Strawberry...?”

The particularly out-of-place scent left Kojou fiercely confused. There was no single source for the scent. It had mixed in the sea breeze characteristic of Itogami Island, blowing the sweet berry aroma his way.

The thinly illuminated surface of the predawn sea was a pretty, light red color, almost as if some edible dye had dispersed within.

The seawater was hard as if it had been frozen, but it occasionally jiggled instead of making waves.

It was bizarre, completely surreal. It was ridiculous, yet he felt no fear. The seawater around the sub-float had changed into strawberry gelatin.

And Kojou didn't even have to think about the identity of the culprit behind the phenomenon. Only the girl who could employ The Cleansing was capable of such ridiculous handiwork.

“Asagi...? To stop the people in the sea from drowning...?”

Why strawberry gelatin, though? Kojou thought dubiously, but he was relieved nonetheless. At the very least, the fact she'd used The Cleansing meant that Asagi was safe.

He didn't know how she had managed to get back in communication with Mogwai. If she had retaken her power as the Priestess of Cain, he didn't think she'd let even the Order of the End get the better of her. Chances were high that she'd already walked across the jellified sea and escaped to Itogami Island proper.

Kojou took out his own smartphone, holding out hope that all phone lines were back. Yet, the reception status indicated he was still out of range.

Suddenly, he sensed that someone was calling out to him from nearby. He could faintly hear a girl's voice coming from the wreckage of the collapsed building.

“Akatsuki! Akatsuki, is that you?!”

“...Kanase?! Where are you?!”

“Akatsuki...! I am here.”

Relying on the snippets of Kanon’s voice reaching him, Kojou climbed over a mountain of rubble.

He saw a small, silver-haired girl sitting on the ground. Her entire body was caked with dirt and dust, but she did not appear to be injured. However, he felt that her expression was distinctly somber even so.

“You all right, Kanase?!”

“Yes, I am fine. However...”

Nodding in response to Kojou’s question, Kanon shifted her eyes shifted her eyes downward. A large man wearing rugged clothing was there in a heap. Ugaki, all a mess and smeared with blood from wounds, was lying facedown.

Noticing Kojou’s approach, Ugaki lifted his face and listlessly smiled in apparent relief. “Big Bro...I’m glad yer all right. That was amazin’...”

“Ugaki?! You...!”

Kojou was at a loss for words.

Ugaki’s lower body was pinned under the structure’s wall. His upper body had a broken piece of rebar piercing him from his back all the way to his chest. Had he not been a troll with such a resilient life force, it would have been no surprise for such grave wounds to have killed him instantly.

Kanon continued holding Ugaki’s hand as she lowered her eyes in anguish. “He shielded me when the building collapsed. He’s hurt...because he saved me...”

Kojou was a little surprised. He hadn’t expected a man like Ugaki to put his life on the line for Kanon, someone they’d barely met.

“Got it. Kanase, move back a little.”

Kojou issued a warning as he entwined a cloud of crimson demonic energy around his right hand.

Kanon politely yielded. Ugaki was plainly afraid, but he was immobile and unable to do anything about it. Nor did Kojou have any words to spare for him.

It was far more difficult to finely control the demonic energy of the overpowered Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor than to unleash it without limitations.

Kojou meticulously steadied his aim to minimize damage to the surrounding area and released his demonic energy. The deep red mist transformed into a raging wind that blew away the building wreckage pinning Ugaki, along with the surrounding rubble with it.

“Heh-heh... Incredible...”

A voice of admiration trickled out of Ugaki, even while coughing on the dust lingering over him. Kojou put his arms around Ugaki’s huge frame and sat him up. He was still impaled by a piece of rebar almost two centimeters thick, but Kojou judged it better not to yank it out. Pulling it out would just make the bleeding that much worse.

Albeit, there was no guarantee that he’d be all right with it left in him, either.

“Hey, Ugaki! Pull yourself together! What happened to that healing ability you’re so proud of?!”

“Urgh, that’s a tall order with this much blood loss, even for me. Plus, my buds all ran away.”

Kojou lent him a shoulder and lifted up his huge troll frame. It seemed Ugaki had a broken leg and was unable to walk on his own.

“Shit... There’s no way to call an ambulance. You just wait; I’ll get you to a hospital right away!”

“Heh-heh... Sorry, Big Bro...”

Kojou walked forward, wobbling from supporting Ugaki, who was around twice his own weight.

Kanon’s eyes turned skyward as if something had taken her by surprise. “Akatsuki!”

“What?” Kojou narrowed his eyes, perplexed.

A strange sound was echoing overhead. It sounded like the buzzing of a giant bee. The noise grated on the ears.

A number of white synthetic objects were descending from the morning sky that had only just begun to brighten. It was a rare sight on Itogami Island—a platoon of large helicopters.

Kojou stood stiff in bewilderment. “What’s...up with that...?”

In total, there were six helicopters in the air. Each was descending to a different sub-float, stopping in midair and hovering just short of landing. Descending from ropes dangling from each craft were people wrapped in white, magically protected clothing.

Some of them were armed, but it didn’t seem that seizing control over domains was their objective. They examined the Rogues Alliance casualties and began to render assistance and healing.

Finally, one group among them noticed Kojou and company and approached with a radio in one hand. “...Participants in the Electoral War? Ruler candidates?” the apparent leader of the paramedic team asked.

Kojou pointed at Ugaki. “This guy is. We were just passing through.”

The team leader nodded with a neutral expression. “Goose One to Goose Leader. Three survivors discovered. One is gravely injured. Requesting recovery unit.”

“Goose Leader, roger. Sending the duck your way.”

“...Who are you people?”

Kojou posed the question as he listened in on their conversation over the radio.

They didn’t look like ordinary people, either in gear or in level of organization. But he didn’t think they were Island Guard or Japanese government Attack Mages. He was surprised that a group like theirs existed on Itogami Island at all.

“We are the Electoral War Administration Committee.”

“...The what?”

“A neutral organization assigned to work related to administering and regulating the Electoral War. Please think of it as exercising the same functions as the Gigafloat Management Corporation while it is shut down.”

Kojou's wariness was raw as he glared at the team leader. "So you're with the Order of the End?"

"You are mistaken. We have been contracted to carry out support for the residents of this Demon Sanctuary, nothing more."

"Support how...?"

"In tangible terms, we dispense water, food rations, clothing, and so on. We secure and treat the wounded. We also carry out maintenance of the demon registration bracelets. It is mostly employees of MAR in charge of the actual work."

"MAR's doing that?"

Surprise spread further across Kojou's face. But some part of him accepted it as well.

MAR—Magna Ataraxia Research Inc.—was the leading face among East Asia's giant corporate concerns. It researched and developed a wide range of products, from pharmaceuticals to fighter aircraft, and constituted one of the world's few sorcerous manufacturing conglomerates.

It was unthinkable that people from any corporate concern except MAR were even capable of replacing the Gigafloat Management Corporation's operations, if only partially. This also resolved the mystery of why the Electoral War Administration Committee was so well supplied and well organized.

"You said you were hired to do this work, right?"

"Yeah."

"Who's the client?"

"Trade secret."

The team leader replied to Kojou's quick follow-up in businesslike fashion.

During that time, a subordinate of his on the rescue team was pressing a small, flat device against Ugaki.

"I have finished identifying the casualty. Mark Ugaki. Island South, domain fifty-seven. Troll—do you forfeit the Electoral War?"

The rescue team member's question brought a weak nod from Ugaki.

Ugaki was prone and lying on a stretcher as he looked up at Kojou and laughed like they were buddies.

"Big Bro, take care of the rest, ya hear me? Become the true ruler of Itogami Island...in my place... Heh-heh..."

"Hey, Ugaki...!"

I don't remember making a promise like that— Before Kojou could speak his retort aloud, a recovery robot carried away the stretcher Ugaki was on top of.

He'd been a brazen, self-centered troll from start to finish, but somehow Kojou couldn't hate the man. And more than that, Ugaki had put his life on the line to save Kanon. *I owe him one, huh?* Kojou thought, feeling unsettled by that.

"Are you a ruler candidate of this domain?" the team leader asked.

Kojou stood stiffly, feeling out of place. "Nah... I'm..." He shook his head. He didn't remember applying to be any such thing, but his presence may well have resulted in both Ugaki and the Rogues Alliance having to forfeit.

"Hmm." The team leader nodded, handing something out toward Kojou. It was a thin data card meant to be inserted into a demon registration bracelet.

"This is the data extracted from his demon registration bracelet. I am handing it to you."

"...Got it. I'll take it."

Kojou took the card with a sigh. Then, he watched as Ugaki was loaded onto a helicopter. "Where do you plan on taking him?"

"An MAR infirmary ship. It's moored at a provisional harbor on New Itogami Island."

With a sudden thought, Kojou pointed beside him at Kanon. "Can you take that girl into your care, too?"

He thought it might be far safer to leave her in MAR's care than for her to remain on Itogami Island now that it was the stage for the Electoral War.

The team leader said coldly, “We are contractually prohibited from accepting any such request.”

Kojou felt like he had no one left to turn to.

“It is a ruler’s duty to protect his subjects. If you have no confidence that you can protect her, you should find another ruler candidate to rely on.”

“...!”

The team leader’s statement was so one-sided that it spontaneously ticked Kojou off, making him want to argue. Kanon strongly clung to Kojou’s right hand. It was the reaction of a puppy fearful of being abandoned by her owner.

“I shall go with Akatsuki. Until death do us part.”

“Um, ah, that’s...”

Aren’t those words supposed to mean something else? thought Kojou, bewildered as he looked at Kanon. He gave up on convincing her when he sensed a powerful will behind her earnest expression.

“...Got it. We’ll look for Nagisa and the others together. Either way, there’s no telling how far we can trust these Electoral War Administration Committee types.”

“Yes.” Kanon happily nodded.

The rescue team of the Electoral War Administration Committee was using expensive-looking equipment and robots without compunction as they searched the entirety of the sub-float. It was clearly far more efficient to leave that task to them than for Kojou and Kanon to wander about. If they couldn’t find Yukina and the others, it was probably safe to assume that they were no longer in the immediate area.

“Maybe they crossed over that gelatin to get to the main island...or maybe they ran away with Rogues Alliance survivors after them.”

Kojou exhaled with annoyance as he gazed at the still-firm surface of the sea. Based on Asagi’s use of The Cleansing, the odds she and the others had already reached Itogami Island proper were quite high.

The problem was that there wasn’t a single clue remaining as to their current

locations.

“Akatsuki, there is...a wolf!”

When Kanon shouted while gazing at the jellified sea, Kojou stared in a daze in the direction she had pointed. “...Huh? A wolf? Why would a wolf be on Itogami Isla...?”

Kojou’s doubt-filled murmur fell silent. What was standing on the translucent sea surface illuminated by the light of daybreak was definitely a wolf. It had silvery fur giving off a metallic luster.

“That’s one of Himeragi’s *shikigami*!”

Kojou’s expression brightened when he realized the wolf’s true nature. It was a remotely controlled familiar created by ritual magic identical to ones Yukina had used previously.

“It seems to be telling us to follow.”

The silver wolf looked toward Kojou and Kanon, then it turned around and broke off in a run toward Itogami Island proper. It seemed to be there to invite the pair just as Kanon had asserted.

Kojou leaped down to the hardened surface of the sea to chase after the *shikigami*. Kanon immediately followed suit.

The *shikigami* increased its speed even as they watched. It was as fast as the form of a wolf suggested. If they were careless, they’d immediately lose sight of it.

“Shit, it’s fast! Kanase, hold tight for a bit, ’kay?!”

“Yes?”

Though Kojou hesitated for a single instant, he put a hand around Kanon’s hips. Then, he picked her right up. He’d judged that a demonified Kojou running while holding her in his arms was faster than matching Kanon’s pace.

“Don’t let go!”

“O-okay...!”

Kanon’s cheeks reddened as she firmly wrapped her hands around Kojou’s

neck.

Her pleasant softness threw him off a little as Kojou increased the speed of his running.

5

“Urk... So tight...”

Asagi Aiba was pressing down on her belly with both of her hands, wobbling and teetering as she flopped against a wall. They were midway on the long, hilly path that led to Saikai Academy.

“Aiba?!”

Yukina, walking ahead of Asagi, looked back with a bit of surprise.

Asagi audibly loosened the metal fastener of her skirt, at which point she finally let out a more comfortable-sounding sigh. She looked back at Yukina with an air of exasperation and envy hovering in her eyes.

“Ahh... No way, it just won’t work! Himeragi, you’re too slender! What the hell is your waist?!”

Asagi was wearing a Saikai Academy uniform as she spoke. However, this was not Asagi’s uniform—it was one she’d borrowed from Yukina.

Having escaped from the sub-float, Asagi and Yukina had gone straight to Yukina’s apartment building. It had been closer, and Yukina needed to get her gear in order regardless. Accordingly, Asagi had showered in Yukina’s apartment and changed out of her battered personal clothes.



There was no particularly deep meaning involved in borrowing a Saikai Academy uniform. Yukina had a large stock of brand-new uniforms on hand, so thanks to that, there was virtually no necessity for her to have personal clothes besides.

The hard part was that the size of Yukina's uniform was markedly smaller than Asagi's.

"Can you use a safety pin?"

Seeing that Asagi had a hard time moving like that, Yukina posed her question with delicacy.

"Nah. It's all right. If I leave all the adjusters open, I can manage. Makes a girl feel awful, though..."

"No, pay it no mind. You are taller, Aiba... Also, your bust is..."

"You don't have to sugarcoat it. More to the point, thanks for lending me the uniform. Thanks to you I got to take a shower, too. I wasn't sure what I was gonna do if I smelled like artificial strawberries any longer." Asagi strained a smile. She sounded tired.

It would soon be 10:00 AM. It hadn't even been six hours since the pair had returned to Itogami Island, and far too many things had happened in that brief span of time. Until now, they'd barely had any time to even take a breath, making Asagi feel like she had several days' worth of accumulated fatigue.

"It would be good if senpai and Nagisa read that letter..." Yukina murmured with her spare guitar case on her back. Asagi nodded.

They had shoved a letter with all the information they knew into the mail slot for the Akatsuki residence next to Yukina's apartment. Also written within was that the pair was heading to Saikai Academy.

If Kojou and others read it, they'd all be able to group up at Saikai Academy, provided everyone was safe and sound.

"Well, at the very least, Kojou wouldn't give up even if you killed him. Thanks to you and Kanase protecting them, Motoki and Nagisa are probably all right, too. And if any of them were hurt, they should get rescued by the Electoral War

Administration Committee,” Asagi said, keeping her spirits up.

“Yes,” Yukina said with a little nod. Then she sullenly lowered her eyes. “MAR...was it?”

“Yeah. That’s right,” Asagi replied curtly. They continued walking in silence for a while.

Asagi had established the mechanisms of the Electoral War and the existence of the committee from data Mogwai had left on Asagi’s smartphone. The conspiracy was a massive operation underpinned by a scrupulously laid-out plan.

Of course, a considerable amount of time had been necessary to make preparations beforehand. In other words, MAR having created all of this with prior knowledge of the Order of the End’s existence.

This fact cast a dark shadow over Asagi’s and Yukina’s hearts. After all, Mimori Akatsuki, mother of the Akatsuki siblings, was an MAR employee herself. They didn’t want to think that she was lending support to this conflict, but they had no basis for summarily ruling it out.

“W-well, MAR is a huge company. It wouldn’t be strange for workers in one division to have no idea what another division is doing.”

“I—I suppose so. The establishment of the Electoral War Administration Committee likely advanced in the greatest of secrecy.”

“Right, right. Besides, maybe Mimori is helping out the medical staff treating the wounded. That’d be good news for Kojou and Nagisa. It’s way safer than if she stayed inside Itogami City.”

“Yes. It would be good if that was truly so.”

Saikai Academy was located in Island South, a residential area with numerous homes, schools, hospitals, and the like. Normally, a holiday would have been filled with much greater liveliness at that time of day as people enjoyed their leisure time.

However, signs of human life in the city were sparse, and the level of traffic was bizarrely scant. People were surely holed up in shelters and their own

homes out of fear of getting involved in the violence.

Even so, compared to the area with the Rogues Alliance prowling about, they felt little bloodthirstiness in the air. Nor was there any eye-catching damage to city facilities or buildings.

Apparently, the ruler candidate of that domain was comparatively dependable.

Yukina's feet stopped at a curve just past a broad intersection. The Saikai Academy campus had come into view. "Aiba."

"So we've finally arrived." Asagi languidly relaxed her shoulders.

Thanks to the halt of public transportation, it had taken quite a bit of extra time to get there. They had nonetheless arrived at their destination.

"I am glad we were able to avoid unnecessary combat."

"Yeah... Somehow, this area has a pretty peaceful atmosphere, but..."

Asagi and Yukina hid in the shadows of roadside trees as they observed the campus. They were on guard against the possibility that a candidate akin to the Rogues Alliance was occupying Saikai Academy.

Still, Asagi had a reason to visit Saikai Academy even with the risks involved. That was the room for the Saikai Academy Demon Sanctuary Research Club—Dem-Club for short.

Placed within that Dem-Club room was a cutting-edge workstation able to access the Gigafloat Management Corporation's systems. Yaze had brought it in as a hedge against exactly this kind of emergency situation.

To be blunt, even with the equipment in the Dem-Club, she probably wouldn't be able to take back control of the City Management System occupied by the Order of the End. Even so, surely it would allow her to gather information to lend Kojou support.

However, that meant infiltrating Saikai Academy first.

Asagi squinted to try and see into the school buildings, but there were simply too many obstructions to see anything. The only thing she could tell was that there wasn't anything visibly out of place outside the school buildings.

“Figures, but we really can’t tell what’s going on inside the school from here.”

“I shall release a reconnaissance *shikigami*. There is a chance the ritual energy will be traced back to us, however.”

Yukina lowered the guitar case on her back and took out a silver ritual tablet from within. When she tried to summon and release the *shikigami*, her expression stiffened as if she’d received an electric jolt.

“Aiba, get down—!”

“Huh?!”

Asagi, suddenly sent flying by Yukina, rolled onto the ground.

When Asagi looked back in shock, Yukina’s *shikigami* exploded before her very eyes.

Upon seeing this, Asagi finally grasped what was occurring. Someone had sniped at them—with magic as opposed to a normal bullet, no less.

“Don’t tell me, a ruler candidate’s attacking?!”

“Please do not move!” Yukina warned, drawing her spear.

Having determined where the sniper was lurking from the angle the round had flown from, she attempted to close the distance. However, Yukina was just leaping out from the shadow of a roadside tree when her movements halted, for she had noticed the fresh enemy silhouette attacking her from above.

“A beast person?!” Asagi muttered in fright at the assailant’s leaping ability, utterly unthinkable from any normal person.

The person was small but had incredible speed. Furthermore, she bounced off buildings and roadside trees to close the distance from unexpected angles.

“White Rabbit Kick Number Two, Jeweled Moon!”

“—Raw Lightning!!” Yukina cried.

Sensing that she had no time to defend with her spear, Yukina used an unorthodox hook resembling an uppercut to intercept the assailant’s kick.

Their mutual attacks struck each other, one infused with demonic and the other ritual energy. In contrast to the midair assailant, Yukina had both feet

planted on the ground. This apparently added some force to Yukina's blunt strike.

"Nyaa?!"

The assailant made a somehow silly-sounding cry as she heavily lost her balance.

Yukina lowered her posture, spear in hand to make a follow-up attack the instant her opponent landed. As if waiting for this moment, incredible demonic energy blew her way from the blind spot behind her.

The initial sniping attack and the assault from overhead were simple diversions.

This was the third enemy, the heavy hitter.

The fighting spirit was far too blatant to come as a surprise. Yukina was a bit perplexed as she responded with time to spare.

The third assailant was an individual clad in an eye-catching white coat. Her appearance made one think of the Order of the End. She was gripping a gleaming crimson long sword in her hands. Its flame-like blade was imbued with almost unbelievably vast demonic energy.

"Prepare yourself, invader! I shall avenge Yuno!"

"Snowdrift Wolf!"

Yukina blocked the crimson long sword's attack with her spear. Snowdrift Wolf's Divine Oscillation Effect neutralized both the cutting attack and the explosive demonic energy it unleashed.

She felt odd feedback, from which she gathered that the girl wielding the long sword was shaken. It was a beautiful girl with white hair and wearing a long cobalt-blue wimple.

"You blocked Hauras?! Invader that you are, I praise you for that much! But —"

The girl stubbornly put strength into her sword to shove Yukina's guard aside and cut her down. Yukina stared at the girl's face and let out a voice of surprise.

“...Eh?!”

“Eh?”

They recognized each other at the same moment. The girl’s already large eyes opened even wider, and her movements came to a halt as if she’d frozen solid. Their weapons remained locked together as she and Yukina stared at each other without a word.

An awkward silence fell between the pair.

“Miss...Kasugaya?”

“Yukina Himeragi? You’re...the invader of this domain...? Eh?”

The ogre attending middle school at Saikai Academy, Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella, drew back her sword, a confused expression still on her face.

“...Domain? Eh?”

Yukina was just as perplexed as she lowered her spear. It hadn’t even been fifteen seconds since the initial sniping attack. Too much had happened in that brief span of time for her comprehension to catch up with it all.

Judging that combat had ended, Asagi brushed dust off herself as she rose to her feet. “Uhhh...what’s going on exactly?”

Yuno Amase was crawling out from bushes by the roadside, smiling awkwardly as she lifted her bestialization. “Um, Shizurin, I’m still alive...”

The last to emerge was Rui Miyazumi, carrying a sniper rifle–type Spell Thrower.

Asagi and Yukina stood stiffly as Rui turned toward them with a crisp smile. Then, with a spell symbol hovering on the surface of his hand, he held it out as if seeking a handshake as he spoke to Asagi.

“Hiya, welcome back, Cyber Empress. I welcome you both to the Kasugaya Domain.”



CHAPTER THREE
RULER RANKINGS

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1

Kojou heard the water running from the shower.

The room had the lingering scent of a perfume he didn't recognize.

He was in a room illuminated by moody, indirect sources of light. There was a wide, king-sized bed. It came extravagantly furnished with karaoke, game machines, and a large TV. It looked like a fancy room meant for a pair of lovers. In other words, he was rooming in a love hotel.

A silver-haired girl was taking a shower on the other side of the glass wall of the bathroom. She was washing off all the dust that clung to her from fighting at the sub-float.

Keeping his eyes averted so as not to catch a stray glance at her defenselessly nude physique, Kojou clutched his head.

"Why...? Why me...?"

Kojou's thoughts were still all over the place as he replaced the blood-smeared tissues packed into his nose with fresh ones.

The garbage bin at the side of the bed was already nearly full of bloodied tissues. His arousal had given him a massive nosebleed.

A beautiful black cat with a lithe frame gazed at Kojou and curtly exhaled. *"Arousal over a nude little girl leading to a chronic nosebleed? How pathetic for the World's Mightiest Vampire."*

"And whose fault is this?! 'Cause it sure ain't mine!"

Kojou slapped the bed's mattress for emphasis and closed the distance with

the cat.

The black cat with gleaming golden eyes seemed oddly human in demeanor. In reality, this was the familiar of Yukari Endou, an elven Attack Mage in the employ of the Lion King Agency and the mentor to Yukina and Kirasaka.

A sorceress of exceptional skill, Yukari was able to converse with Kojou from the Japanese mainland hundreds of kilometers away. She'd said that once a mental link with a familiar or the like was established, physical distance exerted little effect, but there was no mistaking that her abilities were nonsensical regardless.

The wolf *shikigami* leading Kojou and Kanon off the sub-float on the verge of its collapse had also been controlled by her rather than by Yukina. It came as no surprise that the master and the pupil would use the same techniques. Kojou had misunderstood all on his own.

However, Yukari had no doubt engendered Kojou's misunderstanding on purpose, the better to lure Kojou here.

It was Kanon who'd paid the price as a result.

Thanks to Kojou continuing to run with her in his arms, Kanon's eyes had been thoroughly spinning from motion sickness.

"Setting me aside, Kanon's just a regular human, so there's no way she could have safely kept up with your *shikigami*! Show a little consideration at least!" Kojou berated the cat familiar.

He'd overexerted himself to keep up with the *shikigami*'s merciless sprint, so Kojou had been forced to run more roughly than Kanon could take. By the time he realized that Kanon was limp in his arms, he thought his heart was going to stop right there. He was so overwhelmed that he accepted the black cat's subtle temptations and went with Kanon into the love hotel.

Of course, his objective was to let Kanon rest, so he felt no guilt about that. Incidentally, one significant problem with the Lion King Agency outpost on Itogami Island was that it was smack-dab in the middle of the love hotel district.

However, when he thought about it rationally, he felt these excuses were pretty flimsy. This really was an awful situation.

“Relax,” the black cat insisted irresponsibly, caring little for Kojou’s anguish. “No matter what you do to that girl from here on, I will not speak a word to Yukina.”

“Whaddaya mean ‘relax’?! I’m just sitting here, cool as a cucumber!”

“Oh, are you now?”

Kojou forced his heart to calm down as he spoke with a wearied tone. “...Uh, well, I’m a little grateful to you at least. Kanase and I were pretty much at our limits, so I’m glad we could take a breather in a safe place.”

The black cat let out a little laugh. *“The ruler of this domain is the owner of the hotels in the area, you see. That makes it fairly safe for the customers lodging here. He seems to have hired a fair number of tough-looking bodyguards, too.”*

“I’m not really sure if that info should make me feel safer or not.”

Kojou stuck his cheek on a palm as he made a weak, pained laugh.

The glass door of the bathroom opening interrupted their conversation, spreading forth an aroma from the shower. Kanon must have finished in there.

“Akatsuki,” she said, entering the room, “I am sorry for occupying the facilities first.”

“Are you feeling bet—? Aaah!”

“Yes, I am quite all right now.”

Kanon tilted her little head with a mystified look as she watched Kojou recoil, shaken.

She was wearing only a short white bathrobe supplied by the hotel. He could see her bare, white legs and her modest cleavage poking out from the gap at her collar. She wasn’t wearing any underwear.

Kojou shouted, his voice going shrill. “Clothes! What about clothes?!”

For Kanon’s part, her demeanor was as serene as usual. Making her behave in such a sensual fashion was savagely destructive to his psyche. Kanon being oblivious of the situation made him feel like an even bigger jerk.

“Ah yes,” Kanon said. “Akatsuki, please take off your clothes as well.”

Kanon's demeanor was completely unguarded as she approached and squatted down before Kojou's eyes.

Kojou earnestly turned his face away from her bust.

"N-no... This is wrong, Kanase. That's something you should only do together with someone you really like."

Kanon blinked her big blue eyes. "I do like you, Akatsuki."

"Huh...?"



“Therefore, there is no problem in us washing our underwear together.”

“Wh...what do you mean?”

“There is a washing machine and dryer here.” Kanon pointed to a drum-style washing and drying machine. It was the latest model, a high-grade, low-energy machine even able to wash garments graded for handwashing only.

Kanon was telling him to strip so that they could wash Kojou’s dirty clothes together.

“O-oh... So hotels even have stuff like this nowadays.”

Assaulted by a ferocious sense of exhaustion and relief, Kojou wobbled his way to his feet. When he happened to glance at the pillows of the bed, the black cat was on her side as her belly convulsed. She was laughing so much that she was having difficulty breathing.

“Hey, Professor Kitty, you don’t have to laugh that much...!”

Kojou headed to the bathroom, having somehow overcome the crisis of Kanon trying to strip his pants off then and there. The room was lit up in seven differently colored lights, and he found this unhelpful for calming down. He took a shower and changed into a bathrobe before returning to the room.

Kanon was sitting on the edge of the bed, holding the black cat on her lap as she watched television. It looked like a ranking page for pop stars, but the landscape of Itogami Island was showing in the background.

“...What the heck is this?” he asked.

“These are the ruler candidate rankings,” the cat replied.

“Ruler candidate...rankings?”

“Yes, based on territory obtained and the number of subjects. Current standings and betting odds are broadcast to the general public. Updates are largely in real time.”

“Huh?” Kojou glared at the screen in astonishment.

A young demon he didn’t recognize was introducing the various candidates as if it were a promotional video. Information of name, type of demon, age, place

of birth, and footage of combat scrolled on the screen.

“What the hell...? This is almost like some kind of sideshow...”

“That is exactly what it is,” the cat said scornfully. “They may call it the Electoral War, but to the vast majority of city residents, it is someone else’s problem, a nuisance and nothing more. It is no different from being a fan of an idol or cheering on a sports competitor. It is the nature of human beings to enjoy watching the conflicts of others.”

“But a lot of people are gonna get hurt because of this! And some people might even die...!” Kojou retorted.

The black cat lifted her chin, coldly blowing him off. *“All the better, is it not? In ancient times, there was sword fighting, hunting, bull fighting... People delighted in any number of bloody undertakings. Can you really say with a straight face there aren’t humans who want to watch demons kill one another?”*

Kojou’s blood started boiling at the cat’s glorifying tone. However, he said nothing to refute it. This was not because he’d accepted the black cat’s assertion. He was simply too stunned for words.

“Ca...Cas? Why is she...?!” he exclaimed.

The large TV in the love hotel room displayed a blown-up image of a girl with long white hair wielding a crimson long sword. In the schoolyard of Saikai Academy, she was shielding other students while fighting a ruler candidate from a neighboring domain. The footage seemed to have been shot by Itogami Island surveillance cameras.

The screen finally switched to a still, bust-up shot of Shizuri. It was her photo from her identification card used for the city resident registry in Itogami. Her tense, awkward expression was endearing, but of course the current situation did not allow Kojou to find it very amusing.

“Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella of Saikai Academy Domain. Domains ruled: three. Subjects obtained: twenty thousand. Class is grade B, group one. A firmly entrenched ruler at ranking eleven, it would seem.”

“I see, because she’s an ogre... She’s protecting Saikai Academy as its ruler...,” Kojou murmured with conflicted feelings.

As a registered demon, Shizuri was qualified to be a ruler candidate. To run around protecting those close to her out of a sense of justice and at some point naturally falling into this role genuinely fit Shizuri's personality.

But this also meant that she'd be targeted by other candidates.

Watching as the screen finally switched, this time it was Kanon whose voice trickled out. There was a familiar name among the list of candidates on display. "Ah..."

It was the ruler of Island West Domain 31, the Tensou Academy Domain.

"Yume?! Even she's joined the Electoral War...?!" Kojou forgot to even blink as he gazed at the screen, dumbfounded.

He held some small hope that it was someone else of the same name and gender, but the still shot displayed was of an elementary schooler he knew very well. There was footage of her employing the power of the World's Mightiest Succubus to hold a group of beast people at bay.

"Just now, I saw Nagisa."

"Yeah, I only caught a glimpse, but there was that bastard Yaze, too. What are they doing in Yume's domain?" Kojou frowned in confusion.

"Nonetheless, they're safe." Kanon smiled softly at Kojou. It easily melted away the leaden weight of anxiety weighing on his chest.

"Guess so. I'm sure they're worried about you, too, Kanase. Let's meet up with them as soon as we can. Well, not that we can do much until our clothes are finished drying."

"Yes."

Kanon nodded, her silver hair swaying gently. Kojou shifted his eyes toward the black cat on her lap.

"Hey, you. Isn't there any way to get in touch with Himeragi? She's the only one I don't know is safe for sure—"

"Unfortunately, magic is not a cell phone," Yukari replied bluntly through the cat. "I do not mind leaving Yukina to her own devices for the time being. If she lives, she will set eyes upon this channel sooner or later, like it or not."

“I see... So she’ll go to meet either Cas or Yume, then...”

Kojou and Kanon met each other’s gazes and nodded.

If they realized that Shizuri and Yume were ruler candidates, Yukina and Asagi would surely try to meet up with them. The odds of reuniting with them by waiting in either domain seemed far higher than blundering around searching for the pair.

“Either way, the real problem comes afterward,” Yukari said cryptically. “Even if you manage to track Yukina and meet up with her, what do you intend to do afterward, Fourth Primogenitor lad?”

“...Won’t the Electoral War end if we take back Keystone Gate?” Kojou asked.

The source of the uproar was the Order of the End having hijacked the Gigafloat Management Corporation’s management system. In other words, if they could seize back Keystone Gate, this stupid event would be over. At the very least, it would surely stop the candidates from running amok.

The cat coolly squashed his hopes. *“You and Yukina alone cannot retake Keystone Gate when even the Island Guard was unable to protect it.”*

Kojou sullenly knit his brows in response to her provocative words. “It’s not like it’s just us who wanna end this war, right? What do the Lion King Agency and other groups think about this?”

“That is a somewhat troublesome subject.” The black cat lowered her head, conflicted for once.

“Ever since the war of the primogenitors, Itogami Island is an autonomous territory on paper. Without a formal request from the Gigafloat Management Corporation, even the Lion King Agency cannot dispatch Attack Mages on its own authority.”

“Well, isn’t it like this because the Gigafloat Management Corporation got raided?”

Kojou touched the black cat’s nose in exasperation. The black cat gloomily swatted his finger aside.

“True enough, but Itogami Island’s proper ruler is the Fourth Primogenitor.

The Gigafloat Management Corporation merely represents him. Furthermore, it is none other than the Fourth Primogenitor himself who set up this Electoral War. In the current situation, Itogami Island is in a normal operating condition, politically at least. Carelessly raising a hand would be interfering in its internal affairs.”

Kojou’s tone turned hostile. “Wha...? Normal, my ass. He’s an impostor!”

To avert the Holy Ground Treaty Organization’s invasion of Itogami Island, Kojou had proclaimed Itogami Island to be the territory of the Fourth Primogenitor. That proclamation was the basis of the treaty formed between the government of Japan and the Gigafloat Management Corporation.

Even so, there was not actually a single nation on Earth that publicly recognized the existence of the Fourth Primogenitor. Even the Japanese government internally treated the matter as neither here nor there.

The emergence of a Fourth Primogenitor was an uncertain element greatly altering the worldwide power balance, so it was far better to treat his existence as vague to not kick up unnecessary chaos—such ran the thinking of numerous nations.

That was why Kojou did not announce himself as the Fourth Primogenitor. It was far better and more convenient for him to go back to his normal high school student life.

And The Blood had made full use of that ambiguous situation.

He’d announced himself as the Fourth Primogenitor and plunged Itogami Island into chaos. And that ticked Kojou off. The Fourth Primogenitor had an awful reputation to begin with. False crimes attributed to him burned him to no end.

“You believe The Blood is a false Fourth Primogenitor? Well, can you prove that?” the cat inquired.

“...Huh? Prove?”

The black cat’s logical question left Kojou at a loss for words. He’d never thought Yukari of all people would ask him that question.

“We certainly know that you are the proper Fourth Primogenitor, but there is insufficient proof for you to be recognized as such. In contrast, The Blood and his allies made a great big show of their own might, enough to put your claims to shame.”

“So that’s why they went out of the way to wreck Keystone Gate after they’d already occupied it...!” Kojou growled, recalling the scar on Keystone Gate as if it had been impaled by a gigantic sword. Such destruction carved over the course of a single night eloquently fit the legend of the power of the World’s Mightiest Vampire.

It was precisely because of that initial display that the people of Itogami Island had so easily believed the words of The Blood when he proclaimed himself the Fourth Primogenitor.

“And so, the government of Japan has no reason to interfere. Though I imagine the truth is really they do not want to sacrifice even more people.”

Yukari’s self-derisive words tugged at Kojou as he pressed for more.

“...Sacrifice?”

“The Order of the End’s assault on Keystone Gate killed a great many. The Island Guard has essentially been destroyed. We also lost a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency—and Koyomi Shizuka.”

“Koyomi—wait, you don’t mean that Paper Noise person?”

Kojou’s eyes went wide with surprise. The black cat let out a heavy, pained breath.

“Yes. One of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency. Her condition is grave, and we know not whether she shall ever regain consciousness. Had she not been here in a Demon Sanctuary, she would have most certainly perished.”

“Even her...? You’re kidding...” Kojou shook his head, struck by dizziness.

He knew the girl who others called Paper Noise. Once, Kojou had fought her, only to be defeated without being able to raise hand or foot. He’d lost to her, and she had gone easy on him.

The defeated Sword Shaman probably had power equal to Yukina, if not

more. That was because, by rights, Yukina was a Sword Shaman candidate still in training.

“That is the reason why the Lion King Agency is dragging its feet about dispatching others. It is far more efficient to let the ruler candidates crush one another than to exhaust our fighting strength interfering. If things go well, we can learn the Order of the End’s inner workings as well.”

“So bringing me and Kanase here was to tell me all this...?” Kojou flopped onto the bed, sulking.

He had no intention of complaining to Yukari. The Lion King Agency had already been through enough. He couldn’t bring himself to twist their arms for anything further.

This issue was between the Fourth Primogenitor and The Blood. In other words, it was Kojou’s turn to deal with it.

“Well, that is one reason certainly. Besides, you have no hope of victory if you charge into the enemy’s headquarters without even understanding the situation,” Yukari teased.

That way of speaking was her usual, sarcastic self, but he had no doubts that her warning came from the heart. If Kojou charged in without a plan, he would lose. Yukari knew that, too.

It might have peeved him a little, but he could not refute her words whatsoever. Kojou knew exactly how dangerous The Blood and the Order of the End could be.

“You had some other reason, too, right?”

“I suppose I do. It would seem that preparations are finally complete.”

“...Preparations?”

Right after Kojou murmured this with a suspicious look on his face, he felt a ferocious swaying of the air.

Space within the room twisted, and a wave of high-density magical energy gushed forth.

“Spatial control magic...! Natsuki?”

When Kojou saw the mirage-like contours of a person appearing, for a moment, he expected to see his diminutive homeroom teacher. However, it was a middle-aged man with a stern face who emerged out of thin air.

“Geh?! Why are you...?!”

Upon seeing the man, Kojou went pale as he sat up in a hurry.

Kanon opened her eyes wide with a start and put a hand over her mouth. “Father...?”

With a dark expression, Kensei Kanase, former Court Sorcerous Engineer of the kingdom of Aldegia, beheld the sight of Kojou and his daughter sitting upon the bed of a love hotel, dressed only in bathrobes.

2

“Twenty-fourth in the ruler rankings?” Yaze asked while heading down an extravagant corridor reminiscent of a Western castle.

He was inside Tensou Academy’s elementary school section. Nagisa Akatsuki walked beside him as she stared at the school building with beautiful stained glass like it was quite a rare sight. She was wearing a standard Tensou Academy school blazer instead of her own tattered blazer. A student she didn’t know had lent it to her.

“Indeed,” Lydianne answered with pride as she dismounted from her robotic tank. “Class is grade B, group two. Ruled domains: two. Subjects obtained: nine thousand—in other words, nine thousand Itogami City residents have gathered in this domain and depend upon Lady Yume.”

“It is not through my strength alone,” Yume said, blushing slightly and looking away. “We have Miss Lydianne and these children to thank.”

Neatly following behind Yume were threatening-looking demon beasts as if the creatures had overrun the elementary school. However, from Yume’s point of view, it was more akin to taking domesticated dogs out on a stroll. The other students seemed used to it; several were petting their favorite demon beasts as they walked by.

“And these demon beasts? Were they raised here?” Yaze asked.

“Our Creature Club and our affiliated university’s Demon Beast Veterinary Club take care of raising them,” Yume replied.

“That’s amazing...,” Nagisa murmured in admiration. “Well, this *is* the Demon Sanctuary’s top school for young girls...”

“Well, the top private schools on the mainland raise horses for horseback riding, too... I guess this isn’t too different?” Yaze shrugged with a strained smile.

Tensou Academy was already famous for its high admission fees; the creatures it raised only further separated it from the common rabble.

Lydianne looked back at the demon beasts with a slightly sad smile. “Appearances aside, we doth know they are quite tame children, so we wishest not for them to fight if at all possible.”

“They sure make a striking first impression, though.” Yaze stared straight at the demon beasts, recalling how the Rogues Alliance remnants ran for it.

Among the various demon beasts, there were ferocious dogs three to four meters in length and carnivorous, monstrous birds. Watching them closer, he couldn’t say they lacked charm, but that didn’t make them not scary.

“Come to think of it, what are the other students doing? Why do they have to depend on li’l Yume here? Tensou Academy should have lots of other registered demons.”

In place of the eerily silent Yume, Lydianne replied, “Two days ago, they were all injured, and so they were transported to the MAR infirmary ship.

“’Twas not only our registered demon seniors. Lady Dorm Mother and the other teachers with Guardsmen training were all injured protecting this domain. They were entrusted to Lady Yume, who soldiers on as the youngest of the ruler candidates.”

“It really poses no problem,” Yume said with a composed air about her. “Our remaining seniors and peers are assisting, and the name Lilith makes for an effective bluff—”

Yaze patted Yume's head, mussing up her hair as she tried to maintain a strong front. "Baby Yume's working hard. Good girl."

"Do not touch me in such a condescending way. Also, I have told you many times I do not desire rude nicknames."

"Ha-ha, you don't need to blush like that."

"How can you interpret everything I say according to your own convenience...?!" Yume coldly glared at him. "You are incorrigible." However, her face reddened, blushing from Yaze's shower of praise.

"But you really are amazing, Yume. And thank you, too, Lydianne," Yaze added. "You really saved us."

Lydianne puffed out her chest in her school swimsuit-style pilot suit. "'Tis nothing, 'tis nothing. It is a warrior's natural duty to protect others."

Yaze smiled with genuine admiration. "Your personality makes you reliable in a situation like this. Or maybe I should say you're lively...?"

"'Tis a product of training day after day," Lydianne said, taking on a serious tone. "That said, it is in truth most painful I cannot make use of communication networks. It is electronic warfare where my truest strength doth lie."

She came off as a silly kid sculpting her personality around her obsession with period dramas, but she was also a genius hacker whose value was recognized by Asagi herself.

However, with Itogami Island's network currently fragmented, Lydianne couldn't exhibit her true skills. Because she had been on Itogami Island immediately after the start of the war, she might feel even more frustrated than Asagi.

"I am concerned for Mr. Kazuma as well," Yume said quietly.

Kazuma was Yaze's older brother-in-law and the director of the Gigafloat Management Corporation. He was also Yume's legal guardian.

Kazuma was probably close to the scene when the Order of the End assaulted Keystone Gate, hence Yume's worry.

"Well, nothing gets by him. I figure he's all right," Yaze said.

Unusually, Yume did not object to his irresponsible words. All she did was brush him aside with annoyance, pushing past the hand Yaze used to pat her head.

A student in a standard uniform appeared with a cart and greeted Yume when the group arrived at the demon-beast stables. “Ah, Yume, nicely done. You’re not hurt?”

She was a pristine girl and older than Yume—probably a high school student. As befit a young lady at a famous school for girls, she appeared far more mature than Yaze or Nagisa.

“Yes, I am all right. Thank you very much.” Yume removed her beret and bowed reverently. She, too, was unusually well-mannered.

The upperclassman girl fondly narrowed her eyes. “Yume, food has arrived, so we’ve been distributing it to the people taking refuge in the school. We also brought your group’s rations from headquarters, so do have something to eat when you have time.”

“I am sorry for the inconvenience. Thank you very much. Um, if you could use our help—”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. You’re our ruler after all, so it’s fine to act bolder about it.” The upperclassman smiled.

There were cardboard boxes with MAR Inc. logos placed atop the cart the girl was pushing. These appeared to be meals for refugees supplied by the Electoral War Administration Committee.

Just as she was about to leave with the cart she was pushing, she stopped next to Yume and leaned close to the younger girl’s ear. Then she glanced at the side of Yaze’s face.

“Hey, is that person Yume’s big brother?”

“Ah, no, he’s not really my brother... Though he is family in a sense.”

Seeing Yume’s knee-jerk hesitancy, the upperclassman girl narrowed her eyes in delight. “He’s cute. Introduce us later, would you?”

“Er... I... Um...”

“Tee-hee, later then.”

Before Yume could compose herself, the girl pushing the cart had already left.

Watching her as she left, Yume let out a large, audible sigh. Realizing that Yaze was standing quite close, she glared at him.

“Why are you grinning like that?”

“No reason. I’m just happy you acknowledged me as family.”

Yume brusquely brushed him off before scurrying to the stables.

“Please do not get excited over something so trite. You are older and you’re supposed to be more responsible after all.”

Yaze made no attempt to conceal the smile on his face as the demon beasts cut in front of him. They returned to their cages in the stables just as Yume commanded.

With her powerful succubus ability, Yume was able to control demon beasts as she pleased. If she seriously tried, she could probably directly control another ruler’s subjects and put them to sleep. She was a powerful player in this game. The tranquil air within the Tensou Academy Domain was likely a product of the large amount of faith people placed in Yume.

Yaze felt a little uneasy about that. The rulers of nearby domains had surely noticed the menace Yume posed. He didn’t think they’d just leave the Tensou Academy Domain to its own devices.

Yaze pondered that alone until he heard a voice from inside the stables—a hearty, amiable voice.

“Hey there, little ruler. I brought the demon-beast feed. Is here good?” A very tall foreign man tossed the sack of feed grain on his shoulder to the ground.

One might call him handsome, but the man was very good-looking in general. He was slender, yet his physique was reminiscent of a modern sports athlete. He had tough-looking cargo pants and rugged work boots, but they nicely matched the atmosphere he gave off. That said, it didn’t change the impression that he was out of place in a famed school for young ladies.

“Thank you very much, Ki. The children will be delighted,” Yume said.

There was a woman standing beside the tall man. She embraced Yume with incredible force.

She was a mature-looking beauty with golden-red hair. The clothes she wore were simple, yet they looked frighteningly gorgeous just from the fact she was wearing them. The volume of her breasts and the curvature of her hips were also amazing.

In spite of that, she had an innocent face like a young girl as she rubbed her cheek against Yume's.

"Oh my goodness, Yume! You're so cuuute today! I love you!"

"Z-Zana... It hurts to breathe..."

"Oh, sorry. So sorry...!"

Even as she said that, the woman didn't stop squeezing Yume. When Yaze glanced over, Lydianne was hiding in the shadow of the stables, her hands clasped as if wishing for Yume's happiness in the next life. It looked like the woman named Zana had already given Lydianne a similarly painful experience.

For a time, Yaze and Nagisa stood in a stupor, watching the strange actions of the mysterious foreign couple.

"Oh!" Nagisa exclaimed, remembering something. She pointed at the tall man, the one named Ki. "He gave me the sugar plum at the airport!"

Ki looked back at Nagisa with a dubious expression. Then it hit him as well. "The young miss from back in Aldegia!" he said cheerfully. "So we meet again!"

"I'm so glad that you're all right. You said you were going to Itogami Island, and I got worried."

"That goes for both of us. Man, the Electoral War? I had a good scare when I arrived on Itogami Island to find something like that going on. I don't know what would've happened to us if this little ruler hadn't lent a hand."

Ki held out his large hand toward Nagisa as a huge grin stood out on his face. Nagisa exuberantly shook his hand, but Yaze's expression froze. He knew this man's name from what they'd been told back at the Aldegian airport.

Founder of the Holy Ground Treaty, the oldest of the vampire primogenitors

publicly acknowledged to exist; Emperor of the Warlord's Empire, the Dominion boasting the world's greatest military force; the First Primogenitor, aka the Lost Warlord.

That was the true nature of Ki Juranbarada.

3

"...Ki Juranbarada... Don't tell me, you're...the Lo—"

Zana Lashka gently pressed a fingertip to Yaze's lips. "Shhh."

Zana's seductive smile made Yaze experience such fear that he thought his heart might stop. He felt like a mouse caught by a lioness's paw.

"You mustn't speak that name. Not yet, 'kay?" Zana whispered, breathing into Yaze's ear.

Yaze shuddered, dissolving under the heat of that sweet breath, yet he still managed to return the glare. He held back his fear of dying here. "...Why are you here in Yume's domain?"

Zana tilted her head slightly, drawing a blank as she spoke. "Hmm, yeah... Why, I wonder? Because she's cute?" She was definitely dodging the question.

It didn't look like Zana was lying, though. If judging by standards of cuteness, Yume, the youngest ruler candidate, was unmistakably queen of the hill. It seemed that the First Primogenitor coming into contact with Yume was purely due to that, with no real meaning behind it.

All that said, whether Yaze could completely trust Ki and Zana was another matter entirely.

The pair had likely arrived on Itogami Island right after this war had begun. It clearly was no mere coincidence. The First Primogenitor had known that the Electoral War was occurring on Itogami Island in the first place.

They probably also knew about the Order of the End's objective, and events that would occur on Itogami Island to come.

"Oh no...! Lady Yume!"

Yaze's thoughts were interrupted by Lydianne's urgent voice.

Her robotic tank, hidden by ritual spell camouflage, emerged from behind her. Several alarms were sounding from the open cockpit hatch.

"Has someone wandered in again?" Yume asked Lydianne while the latter entered the tank.

Before Lydianne could reply, a Tensou Academy student was sprinting toward the stables.

"Yume!" the student said, gasping for breath. "Come to headquarters, quick! It's really bad!"

"C-coming!"

Led by the schoolgirl, Yume broke into a run with Lydianne's tank following suit. Yaze and Nagisa ended up going after them. Ki and Zana followed.

The domain's headquarters was actually a tent set up on the main building's roof. It was close to the demon-beast stables and offered a view of the entire campus, which was why it was a domain defense command room.

Several large TV monitors had been brought into the tent, and these displayed footage from surveillance cameras all over the campus environs. It really did come off like a battlefield station.

Yume's expression hardened when she noticed a group displayed on the monitor. "Who are these people...?"

It was an organized horde of several hundred armed demons. It clearly wasn't a group of delinquents like the Rogues Alliance; they were better organized by leaps and bounds, and they were armed like a military outfit.

A student sitting in front of a monitor read data from the screen of an application. "The Matsunaga Domain is at our front gates. Their ruler, Nao Matsunaga, is an Old Guard vampire, and his class is grade B, group two, just like you, Yume. He has seventy-eight hundred subjects. Additionally, at the South Gate, grade C, group one's Red Thunder and grade C, group two's Jaws have assembled. Both rulers are beast people, and the number of their subjects is forty-four hundred and thirty-two hundred, respectively."

“At the North Gate...Shironio Girls’ High Domain! Their ruler is Necromancer Honshin, the Witch of Decay! Class is grade B, group one! Ten thousand five hundred subjects obtained!”

“That’s too many...,” the oldest student present murmured in fright.

Yume had around nine thousand subjects who were Tensou Academy students, their guardians, and residents evacuating from nearby. The four domains allied against it had over thirty thousand subjects.

On top of that, Yume was the one and only demon capable of fighting on Tensou Academy’s behalf, and the enemy was invading from three directions at once. No doubt sensing that Yume was a threat, they had formed a union to tear the Tensou Academy down. Yaze’s premonition had become reality.

“What’ll we do, Yume?” the oldest girl asked.

This situation of a leader-like high schooler to rely upon an elementary schooler, demon or not, felt like quite a farce. The people of this domain had no other choice, though.

“Surrender is not an option,” Yume plainly stated. “After all, our foes are rulers who hate Tensou Academy itself. There is no telling what might befall us if we fall under these girls’ rule.”

The rulers of the Matsunaga and Shironio Domains were famous for their grudges toward Tensou Academy. A part of their spite came from the frustration of failing the entrance examinations, and having their boyfriends stolen by Tensou Academy girls accounted for the rest.

The female students in the headquarters nodded in response to Yume’s words.

“Th-that’s right. And that goes double for Red Thunder and Jaws...”

“But can we fight and win this?”

“Against these kinds of numbers, even Yume...”

A worried voice trickled out from Lydianne over the despondent atmosphere filling the tent. “Lady Yume...”

Lydianne’s robot tank was developed as a powerful anti-demon weapon. The

demon beasts raised at Tensou Academy also constituted highly effective military strength that other domains did not possess.

But this time, there were simply too many enemies, and she would be against a vampire. Physical attacks were virtually useless against the Beast Vassals that served vampires. They were the worst enemy for tanks and demon beasts alike.

Of course, Yume knew that. Even so, she could not flee. She was young, but she was the domain's ruler nonetheless.

Even as she trembled with fear, a look of tragic determination lingered in her eyes. Yume would fight.

A gentle arm wrapped around her neck. It was Zana, lightly embracing Yume from behind.

"It's all right. Leave this one to Big Sis."

"Zana...?" Yume looked up at her in surprise.

Ki smirked as he placed his hand on the young succubus's head. "Gotta pay you back for the food and lodging. That's the Japanese Bushido way, isn't it?"

"Th-that may be correct...but..." Yume blinked in bewilderment at Ki's jest.

"Don't worry. Could you all lure the beast people away? Zana, can I leave the vampire in your hands?"

"Of course," Zana replied matter-of-factly as she drew some things out of a back pocket of her skirt, silver-colored metal objects that looked like several rings connected together.

Accessories, I guess, thought Yaze.

Yume began to ask, "Zana...just what are the two of you—?"

"A Beast Vassal has emerged!" interrupted the voice of a student watching a monitor.

Everyone present turned their eyes to the schoolyard below.

Appearing before the front gate of Tensou Academy was a pitch-black bear some six to seven meters in body length. It was a collection of materialized demonic energy so dense that it possessed sentience, one of the beasts

summoned from another world said to serve vampires.

It was a Beast Vassal.

However, the density of the demonic energy taking shape as a Beast Vassal was something else. Of course, it was not as strong as that of a vampire primogenitor, but it was far above the norm as Old Guard vampires went. The power seemed on par with the seventh generation removed from direct descent from a primogenitor, if not the sixth.

“So this is the power of seven thousand subjects...?!” Yaze exclaimed, voice trembling.

Even a non-sorcerer like Yaze could keenly sense the powerful wave of demonic energy. Nagisa, a very sensitive spiritualist, was pale and unable to even raise a voice.

Meanwhile, Zana gazed at the pitch-black bear and gave off a slightly exasperated giggle and smile. “Okay... Tee-hee. I understand wanting to let loose after getting your hands on power, but children who get carried away must be punished, yes?”

“Huh...?”

With a flutter of her short skirt, Zana leaped down from the rooftop. She landed without a sound with lithe movements reminiscent of a cat and raced toward the enemy formation.

In both hands, Zana clenched the silvery metal objects she’d taken out earlier. They were brutal weapons embedded in her hands for pounding enemies with her fists.

Yaze’s eyes went wide with abject shock. “Metal knuckles...?! Wait a... What does she plan on doing against a Beast Vassal with those...?!”

Noticing Zana’s approach, the bear Beast Vassal roared.

With a single blow from the Beast Vassal, the barricade blocking the way to the Tensou Academy front gate broke and flew all apart.

Narrowly evading the flying barricade wreckage, Zana crept into the demon’s flank.

Then, using the brutal silver weapon in her right fist, she smashed the Beast Vassal's side.

The enormous Beast Vassal was forced back, blown several meters into the air before pressing its gouged-out flank and entering a feral rage.

"Sh...she punched a Beast Vassal?!" Yaze screamed.

However glamorous she was, Zana was only about a hundred and seventy centimeters tall, yet she'd punched a Beast Vassal over six meters long into the air. The incredible sight made Yaze doubt his own eyes.

"Goodness... The young ones don't know how to use their power these days. Pathetic!"

Taking light steps, Zana unleashed one punch after the next as she continued to give the Beast Vassal a one-sided beatdown. The more punches she landed, the more the Beast Vassal's contours seemed to falter and warp, parts of its flesh sheared off.

The seemingly impossible sight left the vampire girl who was the Beast Vassal's host standing stiff in a daze, unable to lift a finger. The same went for her fellow vampires and subjects.

"I wonder why... That person... She feels like Yukina...," Nagisa murmured, hiding behind Yaze. She hadn't even realized she'd said something out loud.

"...She does?"

Then Yaze noticed it, too.

The fists with which Zana wielded the brutal silver weapons were emitting the pale glow of spiritual essence. It was the glow of the Divine Oscillation Effect that could rend any barrier and nullify demonic energy. Zana's metal knuckles, like Yukina's spear, were weapons inscribed with the Divine Oscillation Effect activation ritual.

Unlike the modern, polished weapon that was Snowdrift Wolf, however, Zana's metal knuckles were far more savage weapons. The brash attacks and Zana's ferocity and beauty were in sharp relief, instilling feelings of despair and defeat into those who opposed her.

Having relied upon a particularly powerful Beast Vassal, the defeat of that Beast Vassal left the Matsunaga Domain all the more fragile. The one-sided crushing of her Beast Vassal left the ruler half in tears, losing all will to fight. Her subjects fled one after another, and the other vampires began to shift around in worry. The victor was already clear.

However, the Matsunaga Domain was not the only foe Tensou Academy faced.

“Yume, there’s a zombie at the northern gate...!” another girl watching a monitor yelled. She looked sick to her stomach.

A raw stench blew in, riding the wind.

A giant as tall as the school buildings of Tensou Academy slowly rose up, glaring toward the headquarters.

The giant was in fact a mass of rotting flesh colored a bluish-black.

It was a towering zombie created from fusing various kinds of corpses together—cattle, pigs, whales and other aquatic mammals, demon beasts, demons, and human beings. This was the soldier of the ruler of the Shironio Domain, the Witch of Decay.

“Slapping zombies together to make a new creature...” Ki sourly twisted his lips. “Well, isn’t that fiendish.”

Since zombies neither felt pain nor feared death, they made excellent troops. They were also effective at crushing enemy morale. However, the sanitary issues they posed and the heavy depletion of demonic energy made them difficult to transport. Furthermore, the ethical issues involved had prompted banning the use of zombies for military purposes.

And yet she had created this monster and set it loose in an urban area without qualms. It was an act of heresy committed by a witch, someone who had formed a pact with a devil to become an inhuman being.

“Well, demonic energy fine. I’ll send it back to the dust right this sec.”

Vaulting over the roof’s handrail, Ki leaped onto the roof of the neighboring auditorium. That put him in just the right position to be face-to-face with the

giant zombie.

The rotting behemoth swung with a crooked, warped arm. It meant to smash Ki along with the auditorium's roof.

Ki stood defenselessly as he pointed a fingertip toward the zombie's heart.

It was what you might call a finger gun.

"Bang" went the quiet murmur from Ki's lips.

That instant, the zombie's giant body swayed. Staggering heavily as if it had been shot, it slowly fell onto its back.

This took the witch of Decay's camp by surprise. The giant zombie they had employed as their vanguard had not only failed to attack the enemy, but now it was falling onto its allies' own heads.

The endangered subjects fled in a panic, sending up screams as rotting flesh and fluids burst apart.

The necromancer Witch was crazed with rage, but there was no sign of the fallen giant zombie rising anew. Indeed, the zombies surrounding her as bodyguards had stopped moving, too, and the entire army of the dead was in collapse.

"What...? What happened?!" Yaze leaned over the guardrail on the roof, gazing at the back of Ki, who was sitting there, bored.

"It cannot be...!" Lydianne stared at the demonic energy instrument data she read from her tank. "Colliding opposing demonic energy with magical energy to wipe it out and nullify necromancy?! Surely, surely...that is not even..."

Yaze finally understood the meaning of Ki's actions.

"Magic muting using interference from demonic energy...?! Technology that military researchers and sorcerous engineers all over the world can't make viable?! And you used that with just flesh and blood?!"

"Oh no, that Witch is...!" Lydianne's expression stiffened.

Countless magic circles were lighting up in the area around the necromancer known as the Witch of Decay. Gathering as much demonic energy from her

subjects as she could, she was attempting to counter Ki's magical muting.

However, this was a foolish act.

Her necromancy had not vanished. It was still operating normally. It just looked like it wasn't activating because Ki was slamming demonic energy against it of the exact same strength.

As an example, her situation was like being unable to hear sound from a speaker because she was wearing high-quality ear protectors.

So what would happen to you in that situation if, unable to hear sound, you cranked the speaker beyond its electrical limits—?

"Sorry, li'l lady," Ki murmured as he released the magic muting.

A vast amount of obstructed magical energy coursed into the giant zombie all at once. Its flesh couldn't withstand all of that magical energy. Each individual corpse magically packed into it flew apart, and every magical line was burned away.

The backlash of excess magical energy attacked the caster, the Witch herself. Unable to even scream, the Witch collapsed to the ground, her entire body fiercely twitching. She was unable to recover, not so much as a ruler but as a necromancer. She probably hadn't understood what had happened to her even at the very end.

"Lady Yume!"

"I understand."

Yume spread jet-black wings of demonic energy. Using her mental sympathy waves as a succubus, she conveyed her orders to a demon beast under her command.

However, her order was not directed toward the demon beasts in the stables.

Yume had another ally besides them, who was far removed from Itogami Island at a depth of tens of thousands of meters, right on the ocean floor.

On a street near the Tensou Academy school grounds, Red Thunder and Jaws beast people were on standby in a square when an enormous flame gushed up behind them.

An object resembling a meteorite flying in from high altitude had collided with the ground, causing a massive explosion.

“Leviathan’s living missiles...?!”

Yaze opened his mouth at an angle as he beheld the sight of beast people fleeing in a panic.

The monster called Leviathan was said to be a weapon of the gods—the World’s Mightiest Demon Beast, able to wipe Itogami Island itself off the map if it so wished. That was Yume’s trump card.

Yume called out to the opposing ruler candidates using a speaker for public announcements inside school grounds. “That was a warning shot. Knowing this, do you still wish to continue?”

Of course, there was no one who would defy her after witnessing that attack.

The demons had begun to flee, and many of their subjects were raising white flags.

Cheers arose from Tensou Academy students all over the school. The fight was over. Yume had won by a mile.

In a place removed from the excited students, a grave expression came over Yaze. He was standing in front of the vampire from a foreign land, staring at the giant zombie that had burned to ashes. “What’s the big idea, Ki Juranbarada?”

“What is it, lad? Don’t be angry. Whatever it looks like, I worked really hard to hold back.”

Sitting on the auditorium’s roof, Ki scratched his head with a guilty look on his face. He’d apparently misunderstood, thinking that Yaze was angry that the necromancer was beyond saving.

Ki’s words—that he’d held back—were the truth.

He didn’t have to go through the trouble of magic muting. If he’d summoned a Beast Vassal, he could have wiped out a zombie of that level with ease. However, if a Beast Vassal of the First Primogenitor appeared, the damage would never have been limited to one girl. Tensou Academy’s school grounds would surely have been harmed far beyond what had been destroyed from

Leviathan's missile attack.

Yaze wasn't irritated that Ki had defeated the Witch.

"Why are you lending Yume a hand?" Yaze asked. "Don't tell me you're seriously trying to make her the ruler of Itogami Island?"

"Ooh, that sounds pretty fun."

So that's one option, said the way Ki clapped his hands together with a serious look. His reaction had such a ring of truth that Yaze was left unnerved.

"Hey!"

"I'm joking, lad. Don't worry. Well, it's true that I'm amusing myself with this stupid ruckus called the Electoral War, but technically our objective is something else."

Ki looked up at the flustered Yaze and smiled with delight.

"Objective?" Yaze grimaced as he probed back.

Ki still had a smile on his face. His eyes blazed ominously. "Putting ghosts to rest."

4

Unfamiliar people were all over the place inside the Saikai Academy school building. The sights of families with young children and the wounded wrapped with bandages were especially conspicuous. They seemed to be civilians residing in that domain.

"So many refugees..."

Yukina was a little shaken as she walked down a familiar corridor.

All of Itogami Island's populace was caught up in the war. She'd understood that logically, but seeing refugees with her own eyes made her painfully aware of the gravity of the situation.

Rui Miyazumi was leading the way for Yukina and Asagi. He explained the situation in a soft manner. "There's a rule in the Electoral War not to cause

harm to civilians, but many people feel anxious in spite of that. Maybe there aren't a lot of trustworthy rulers close by who make people think, *I want to be with that one.*"

"In other words, all these people gathered together are subjects relying on Kasugaya?" Asagi's admiration was clear in her raised eyebrows.

Shizuri had enrolled as a student in April, making her a so-called newbie at Saikai Academy. To become the representative of Saikai Academy and gain the trust of so many neighboring residents could be fairly called a brilliant achievement. Even in the emergency situation called the Electoral War, it wasn't something that could be achieved through any ordinary level of effort.

"Unfortunately, I can claim no credit for this," Shizuri muttered with a small pout.

"Huh?" Asagi said. "What do you mean?"

Someone approached from the other side of the corridor. Noticing Shizuri, she fondly waved a hand. It was a young woman with her red hair triple braided with dumpling-style hair buns and wearing a Chinese dress.

"Thank you for your hard work, Kasugaya. The meals have arrived. They're not all gone, so why not sit down and eat right away?"

"...Ms. Sasasaki?"

"Oh, it's Himeragi and Aiba. When did you come back to Itogami Island?" The woman in the Chinese dress smiled in carefree fashion.

Yukina was so relieved that there was an adult she recognized that it surprised even her.

Misaki Sasasaki was the physical education teacher for the middle school and Yukina's and Nagisa's former homeroom teacher. She was a younger classmate of Natsuki Minamiya during their school days, and it appeared that she was a Federal Attack Mage in a similar fashion.

In truth, even Yukina didn't know Misaki's true might, but she had no doubt the teacher was very capable. To Yukina, her presence at Saikai Academy was very good news.

“We only returned from abroad a short while ago. I am glad that you are safe and sound, Ms. Sasasaki.”

Misaki smiled cheerfully. “Well, yeah I’m all right. I’ve gotta work hard while Natsuki isn’t here.”

The words *Natsuki isn’t here* left Yukina with a faint foreboding.

“Could it be it’s actually Ms. Sasasaki managing this domain?” Asagi asked Shizuri quietly.

Shizuri gave a sigh mixed with self-derision. “But of course. I could never have assembled twenty-six thousand subjects on my own.”

“No, no, Kasugaya worked really hard.” Misaki gave Shizuri’s shoulder several pats as if trying to pound her assertion home.

“And those two friends of hers, too. I’m not a pure demon, so I can’t be a ruler candidate, see. It’s really a huge help to have Kasugaya here.”

“Do not be concerned, Ms. Sasasaki. As a Paladin of Gisella, I understand the duty that I must fulfil—Ow, that hurts! You are patting too much! Ow!!”

“Um... I am wondering, what do you mean that Ms. Minamiya is not here?” Yukina asked, interrupting the attention focused on the teary-eyed Shizuri.

Misaki casually shook her head. “That’s what I wanna know. I lost contact with her just before the Electoral War started, and she’s been missing since. Well, she was on holiday, I suppose.”

“She’s missing...?”

Yukina felt a deep stirring inside her chest. Though she had adopted a cheery tone of voice, Misaki had surely noticed for herself that something had happened to Natsuki. If Natsuki had been in full health, she would have never let an idiotic farce like the Electoral War rage unchecked.

Bringing her face close to the unnerved Yukina, Misaki lowered her voice to a whisper as she continued. “Also, there are rumors that the Lion King Agency’s Paper Noise has been killed. Seems like this Order of the End group is pretty dangerous.”

“Lady Shizuka was...?”

All expression vanished from Yukina's face. It felt like the earth had fallen away from under her feet.

To the Attack Mages of the Lion King Agency, the existence of the Three Saints was absolute. It was not because of the influence they possessed or other abstractions. It was purely because they were so strong. Their power was overwhelming.

Even when told Koyomi had been killed, Yukina could not easily believe it.

But if Misaki's information was fact, the Order of the End's power surpassed that of the Lion King Agency.

"Unlike Natsuki, my main job is guarding the school so I don't have Gigafloat Management Corporation connections. To be honest, the current situation's filled with things I don't know anything about," Misaki said. "So this is purely my intuition, but I'll give you one word of advice—this whole Electoral War is nothing but a fraud."

"A fraud...?" Yukina reacted vaguely to the sudden words of warning from her former homeroom teacher.

Misaki paid no heed, proceeding at her own pace. "The Order of the End's goal is probably something totally different. So I don't want you to be fooled... At least not you and Aiba. It's completely fine to leave all the troublesome subject and domain stuff to me, 'kay?"

"Why us, specifically?"

Misaki was confident in her assertion. "You two already decided who your ruler is in your hearts, didn't you? Long before this war started."

Yukina was bewildered as she shook her head. "Our ruler...? No, that's... I am merely senpai's observer. It is not as if I think of him as a ruler..."

"I don't remember speaking one word about Akatsuki," Misaki said, feigning cluelessness.

Yukina's words caught in her throat.

Misaki turned toward Shizuri. "Right, Kasugaya. Could I have you redeem about ten thousand vouchers? I wanted to distribute food rations and blankets

to the people sheltering in the gymnasium.”

“Understood.”

Shizuri took out her smartphone and began operating an unfamiliar application. Asagi peered at the screen from behind her.

“What do you mean...? Vouchers?” Asagi asked.

“Digital tickets issued by the Electoral War Administration Committee.” Shizuri finished operating the application in awkward fashion. The screen was displaying logos for the Electoral War Administration Committee and MAR Inc.

Rui politely explained for Asagi’s benefit. “Of course, the number of tickets you get is determined by your standing in the ruler rankings. Rulers use these vouchers to requisition electricity, water, and food for the subjects within their domains.”

Asagi nodded in understanding. “Ruler rankings... Saikai Academy Domain is grade B, group one, or something like that?”

“Yes. First-to seventh-place rulers are grade A. Grade B, group one is eighth to fifteenth. At the very least, if your domain is at least in grade B, your standard of living is largely unchanged from before the Electoral War.”

“...So put another way, grade B and above means you’re ahead of anything the subjects in grade C domains get?” Asagi knit her brows.

“That’s what it amounts to, yes.”

The ruler rankings weren’t a simple display of the candidates’ combat abilities. The rankings themselves were a trap to instigate conflict between the ruler candidates.

The subjects of smaller, weaker domains demanded victory from their ruler candidates to secure their livelihoods, fearful that they would become impoverished compared to the subjects of powerful domains. These conflicts eventually bred an increase in resentment, becoming the embers for fresh conflicts. This was how the entirety of Itogami Island was being dragged into the vortex of battle. That was the Electoral War mechanism at work. It was a cunning, cruel strategy.

“And that application?” Asagi asked, pointing at Shizuri’s phone.

Unsurprisingly, it was Rui who replied. “That’s an application distributed by the Electoral War Administration Committee. Beyond administering the vouchers, it gives you rapid updates of the ruler rankings and a warning system.”

“Warning system?”

“A warning when subjects of neighboring rulers enter your domain. It works kind of like radar.”

“You mean, this is why you tried to shoot us out of the blue?” Asagi shot Rui a dirty look.

“Well, you should know that I was using a weak paralytic spell to snipe at you...” He raised his hands weakly. “They distributed a number of other apps, too. For example, the free communication app allows you to call not only people in the same domain but also subjects of rulers who have formed an alliance.”

“Alliances... Right, so the Rogues Alliance had to be using this.” Asagi nodded with an odd sense of admiration. Her interest seemed to be purely on a technical level.

“Can we use this application to contact Akatsuki-senpai for instance?”

Yukina interjected as she suddenly remembered something. If she could call another domain’s subjects, then it was possible Kojou was within call range—or so she thought.

However, Rui shook his head, conflicted. “Unfortunately, our team leader has yet to form an alliance with anyone. Forming an alliance requires direct contact between both rulers so that they may exchange codes, making it rather difficult.”

Asagi understood where Rui was coming from. Contact between candidates meant one candidate heading out into the other’s domain. Setting aside cases where you backed the other side into a corner and they had to cooperate, like it or not, the risk was simply too great.

“Incidentally, I wonder if it’s a good thing if we become Kasugaya’s subjects?” Asagi asked. She had only thought of it now.

Saikai Academy was a place Yukina and Asagi were deeply familiar with, and they could trust Shizuri. She thought that was plenty to form a pact between ruler and subject.

However, Shizuri tilted her head as she glared at the screen of her smartphone. “According to this application, the two of you are already registered as subjects of another domain.”

“Another domain...?”

Yukina was a little surprised as she and Asagi glanced at the other’s face.

Asagi grimaced. “Who the hell went off and decided that...?”

“This registration number would put you with the old Ugaki Domain...,” Shizuri said.

“O-oh?” Yukina said.

“Why do we have to be Pork Troll’s subjects?!” Asagi yelled.

Certainly, Ugaki had been the first ruler candidate Yukina and Asagi had come in contact with, but they had no recollection of becoming his subjects. In the first place, he ought to have lost his qualifications as a candidate when Kojou had defeated him with ease.

“Wait. Someone else has inherited this registration number.” Rui pointed out a warning indicator on the app. “There’s no data on this individual, though.”

Naturally, relieved expressions came over Yukina and Asagi.

“You mean he is an unregistered demon?” Yukina asked.

“You don’t mean...Kojou?” Asagi added.

Shizuri read the data aloud.

“Five subjects obtained. Zero ruled domains. This individual has not reached the minimum number of subjects to be assigned a class. Ruler ranking is a tie for one thousand five hundred and fiftieth. The portrait drawn is of a candidate in name only.”

Asagi lightly touched a hand to her forehead. Asagi, Yukina, Yaze, Nagisa, and Kanon—barring Kojou himself and the wounded Ugaki, presumably retired from the contest, the number of subjects was a perfect match.

“Pathetic numbers unworthy of the Fourth Primogenitor,” Asagi mumbled.

“One’s worth is not measured in numbers from foul villains like the Order of the End,” Shizuri retorted coldly.

Shizuri and Asagi were still facing off as Yukina stared intently with a surprised expression.

The ruler ranking positions decided by the Order of the End were meaningless numbers—such an obvious thing had not occurred to Yukina whatsoever until Shizuri had asserted it.

“Wh-what is it?” Shizuri grumbled.



“Ahh, sorry, I thought you said something pretty nice there,” Asagi said.

“Yes. I am somewhat moved,” Yukina added.

“This much is to be expected from a Paladin of Gisella.” Shizuri was proud but also bashful as she blushed. She was still blushing when Yuno, who’d been silent up to that point, lightly tugged on the sleeve of Shizuri’s robe.

“Those worthless rankings just changed a bit.” Yuno held her own smartphone in front of Shizuri’s suspicious eyes.

“Changed...you say?”

“The Tensou Academy Domain’s Yume Eguchi added four to her domains ruled, shooting up to eighth place in the rankings all at once. Her number of subjects went up by thirty-three thousand, too. That puts you down to a tie for twelfth place, Shizurin.”

“I do not particularly care about such a trifling thing, but—”

“H-hold on a sec!” Asagi hastily interrupted Shizuri’s composure. “Tensou Academy—you mean *that* Tensou Academy? The rich, fancy all-girls school?”

“Yume is a...domain ruler?”

The thumbnail photo on the rankings was most definitely the Yume Eguchi who Yukina knew. Certainly, Yume was qualified to be a candidate given that she was the World’s Mightiest Succubus.

“What the hell...?” Asagi was staring at the screen. “Wait, Motoki and Nagisa are on this page, too!”

For some reason, the ruler candidate individual timeline page contained a video that showed Yaze and Nagisa. Apparently, Yume had saved them when remnants of the Rogues Alliance attacked them.

“Um...Asagi Aiba? What are you two so surprised about...?” Shizuri sounded irritated.

In the brief span of time since coming to Itogami Island, Shizuri had never met Yume face-to-face. Of course, she knew neither that Yume was a succubus nor of her relationship to Kojou.

“But this could definitely go south, huh?” Yuno’s words were grave, but her tone was carefree.

Shizuri knitted her brows with a mystified look. “In what manner?”

“If they shot up in the rankings this fast, the others around won’t just let that go, right?”

“I suppose not,” Rui said. “In particular, the rulers beneath grade A will not take this well. They have had the advantage in combat strength until now, but if Tensou keeps growing at this pace, there is no telling when they will be knocked down.”

Asagi was getting irritated as well. “You mean they’ll try to crush the Tensou Academy Domain?”

“I think that is likely.” Out of consideration for Asagi, Rui restrained himself from graver words.

“Oh yeah!” Yuno smiled cutely as an idea came to mind. “So how about we form an alliance?”

“Alliance? You mean us allying with Tensou Academy Domain?” Shizuri narrowed her eyes, her wariness plain. Her expression showed that she was not a fan of the idea.

It was not as if she bore any hatred toward Yume for being a succubus, nor did it feel like she was resisting because she didn’t know the girl. Her appearance and conduct gave the impression of someone on her high horse, but for better or worse, Shizuri was not one for such trivialities of pride.

Shizuri felt hesitant to form an alliance with Tensou Academy because of the risks it posed.

If Tensou Academy was being targeted because of its rapid rise in power, forming an alliance with them meant the odds of Saikai Academy being attacked would be just as high. Shizuri was fearful that if it played out that way, the subjects of the Saikai Academy Domain would be exposed to danger, too.

However, there were of course merits to the plan. To an isolated area without a powerful ally like Saikai Academy Domain, having more allies to count on

when the chips were down was something to be genuinely grateful for. Strategically speaking, it would also be a check upon the ruler candidates of adjacent areas.

“It is all right. You can trust Yume,” Yukina insisted to the hesitant Shizuri. “She is our friend.”

“She’s a bit cheeky, but she’s a very polite, very good girl,” Asagi concurred. “She’s really fond of Kojou.”

“...Even an elementary schooler is not too young for that man?” Shizuri was exasperated simply by hearing Kojou’s name in this context.

Both Asagi and Yukina responded oddly.

“Who’s to say...? But I think her talk about marriage has to be a joke...”

“Yume is particularly cute, though.”

“No denying that...”

Yuno made a cackling laugh with a very interested look. Shizuri froze, lost for words.

Rui used Shizuri’s smartphone to indicate a safe route to Tensou Academy. “Our proposing an alliance with them means the team leader has to go meet her in person.”

Tensou Academy was close to the border between Island South and Island West. It was close to the destroyed sub-float. Thanks to the annihilation of the Rogues Alliance that had been holding that turf, the surrounding districts were blank areas in which one ran the danger of facing off against other ruler candidates.

“Um... If you are going to negotiate with Yume, I will go with Kasugaya.” Yukina modestly raised a hand.

“Yeah. If Kasugaya goes into Tensou Academy by herself, it might be mistaken as an act of invasion,” Asagi pointed out.

“Mistaken... How could anyone mistake this face full of benevolence as the face of an invader...?!” Shizuri retorted.

“It certainly would be better if you went with acquaintances of the other ruler,” Rui advised. “She is an elementary school girl after all—”

Yuno was oddly serious. “That’s right. Go talking to a kid out of the blue and people will call the cops or something...”

“Why am I being treated as if I am some kind of criminal suspect?!”

That said, as a ruler candidate, Shizuri required an escort, and it was also necessary to leave behind people who could defend the Saikai Academy Domain. Having Yukina, Yume’s friend, escort Shizuri and leaving Rui, Yuno, and Misaki behind at Saikai Academy was hardly a bad division of labor.

“At any rate, Yukina Himeragi, about the matter earlier...” Shizuri made a small cough as she stepped closer.

Yukina blinked and tilted her head. “Oh... Earlier matter? By which you mean...?”

“Kojou Akatsuki’s relationship with the ruler of Tensou Academy Domain!” Slamming a hand against the wall of the corridor, Shizuri backed Yukina against the wall so that she would have nowhere to run. “How did those two become acquaintances? Please, tell me! In *detail*!”

“Eh? ...Eh?! ”

Overwhelmed by the force of Shizuri’s ghastly aura, Yukina turned her face upward.

Forming an alliance between Shizuri and Yume would not be easy.

5

Kojou was still scared stiff in his room at the love hotel.

Standing in front of him was Kensei Kanase, the former Court Sorcerous Engineer of Aldegia and Kanon’s adoptive father.

Kojou and Kanon were in bathrobes, stiffly sitting side by side on the same bed. *Awkward* didn’t even begin to cover what they were feeling. It was a dangerous situation. If this man slugged Kojou in the face, Kojou wouldn’t

blame him.

After a few more tense moments, Kojou asked in a weak voice, “Why is... Kanase’s old man here...?”

Kensei, a well-respected sorcerous engineer, used spatial control magic. Appearing suddenly was not out of the norm for him—but why *now* of all times?

Kensei slowly surveyed the area before taking a step toward Kojou and his daughter.

“Wait. You have it all wrong!” Kojou hastily insisted, overwhelmed by the intimidating aura of Kensei’s presence. “Me and Kanase were just washing our clothes! We haven’t done a single indecent thing!”

Given the situation, Kojou could not hope to avoid the man’s ire, but he couldn’t take being scolded by Kanon’s adoptive father for something he hadn’t even done.

Plus, I’ve gotta resolve the misunderstanding for the sake of Kanon’s honor, he thought.

Kensei blatantly ignored Kojou as he addressed the black cat on Kanon’s lap. “My apologies. Setting the coordinates for teleportation was more trouble than I expected. Truly, I cannot emulate the Witch of the Void.”

The black cat yawned a little while grooming her face. *“I don’t mind. Thanks to that, I was able to have a nice, long chat with these children.”*

In the end, Kensei was there only because Yukari had summoned him. They were acquaintances of a sort.

Kojou looked up at Kensei, whose demeanor was unchanged. “You’re not... upset?” Kojou asked.

Kensei nodded somberly. “Whatever she may seem, Kanon is a very levelheaded girl. She has surrendered herself to you because she trusts you. There is nothing for me to say at this late juncture.”

“Wait. Like I said, she’s not doing anything like that. We’re just waiting for our clothes to dry.”

“But I do demand that you take responsibility as a man, Fourth Primogenitor.”

“You’re kidding, right?!” Kojou clutched his head as he wailed.

Suddenly, a light digital tone coursed into the room. It was coming from the washer and dryer machine placed in the corner of the bathroom.

Oblivious to the current mood, Kanon went to get the laundry. “It seems the clothes have just finished drying.”

A sense of fatigue washed over Kojou. He turned to Kensei. “So what are you doing here anyway? I thought you were in the custody of the Gigafloat Management Corporation.”

“That Gigafloat Management Corporation is all but annihilated. There is no reason for me to remain captive, is there?”

“Is that, um, okay?” Kojou blurted out. *Doesn’t that make you a fugitive?*

“As far as public records are concerned, Kensei Kanase is not a criminal, you see,” Yukari said through the cat, grinning as much as a feline can. *“In this situation, they no doubt allowed him to walk right out. His circumstances are different from a demon prison escapee or other sorcerous criminals.”*

Kojou felt uneasy. “The way you said that makes it sound like there are actual sorcerous criminals who escaped from prison...”

“Inmates no doubt form some percentage of the ruler candidates. Otherwise, public order would not have crumbled in the span of two days, no?”

“I was thinking it was weird that guys like the Rogues Alliance just crawled out of the woodwork. So that’s what it is...” Kojou clicked his tongue in annoyance. As he did, Kanon came back beside him carrying the dry clothes she had meticulously folded.

When she began to change her clothes beside him, Kojou hastily shooed her to behind the partition, then continued his questions with a weary voice.

“But the really bad ones are under Natsuki’s management, so I guess we don’t have to worry about that, right?”

For some reason, the vibe inside the room abruptly changed. The gloominess of Kensei’s expression deepened, and the black cat looked away from Kojou.

“What? What’s with the silence...? Hey, Professor Kitty?”

When Yukari sank into silence and started behaving like a normal cat, Kojou scooped up the cat to try to pry out an answer. Even so, he was met with silence.

Kanon broke that quiet space when she returned from changing. “I am sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“Then let us be off.” Kensei Kanase seemed outright delighted.

Kojou glanced between his expression and that of the black cat. “Go? Go where? And what about the hotel fees?”

“I’ll have it put on the Lion King Agency’s tab for today. Yukina can pay for it later.”

“Like hell you will!” Kojou shouted in a shrill voice, despite knowing Yukari had said that only to make him angry.

He thought that if he didn’t hammer in the nail then and there, the black cat would genuinely order Yukina to settle the tab.

During that silly exchange between Kojou and Yukari, Kensei began preparing the magic circle. Teleportation was high-level magic, so even Kensei couldn’t use it without preparation. The only ones able to go without were a tiny portion of powerful witches, one of whom was Natsuki.

“Grab ahold of me, Kanon. You too, Fourth Primogenitor,” Kensei instructed.

Kanon took hold of his extended hand, and then Kensei used his other open hand to grasp Kojou’s.

Next, Kensei chanted a complex incantation to activate the spell. Kojou and Kanon felt dizzy as their vision distorted. They were struck by a momentary sense of being freed from the power of gravity. By the time that sense abated, Kojou and the others were inside an unfamiliar building. It was an unadorned, windowless underground room.

A large quantity of documents, computers, and magical experimentation devices were arranged within.

Kojou’s eyes swept the room. “Is this...your lab?”

“This is Itogami Island Sorcery Lab Number Six. It is a sorcerous research facility assigned the highest level of secrecy because it deals with forbidden classes of magic. It is also one of the few Gigafloat Management Corporation–related facilities that has survived beyond the start of the current war.”

Kensei showed the building’s location on a map via a nearby monitor.

The lab was on the lowest underground strata of Island North and close to a prison. Because it was in an isolated environment, it was spared from the fighting. The Island Guard unit protecting it seemed to have survived unscathed as well.

“This building’s water and electricity are supplied through an independent system separate from that of Itogami Island proper. It has sufficient stores of food as well, and we have a mutual nonaggression pact with the ruler candidates of the bordering domains. It is safe for the time being.”

“For now... Well, I’m pretty glad you’re safe and sound, though.” Kojou shot Kensei a suspicious look. Surely Kensei hadn’t used teleportation for the mere purpose of providing safe shelter.

Standing beside Kojou, Kanon suddenly raised a voice of delight. “Abbess!”

Sitting on top of a worn-out sofa in the lab was a beautiful oriental doll not even thirty centimeters tall. The doll lifted her face in response to Kanon’s call. Then, it opened its mouth with an oddly haughty demeanor.

“Ohh, Kanon. You must be tired from your long journey. Are you tired from the time difference?”

“That’s not the first thing you should be worried about, sheesh...” Kojou sighed.

The doll was actually Nina Adelard, the Great Alchemist of Yore—at least, what was left of her.

Due to a certain incident, she had lost most of her physical body, reduced to the size of a small animal, and Kanon had taken care of her ever since. However, her haughty demeanor had remained. Perhaps that was impressive.

“Why is Nina together with Kanase’s dad?” Kojou asked, his wariness growing

even more.

“I called her over,” Yukari answered. “After all, alchemists know the most about repairing a homunculus. As they say, sense comes with age.”

Nina’s cheek twinged as if something had snapped inside her. “You are the last person I wish to treat me as an old woman, O elven elder. I have barely managed to reach two hundred years of age.”

The black cat’s ears twitched. *“Aren’t you leaving out a good seventy more? I wasn’t even alive when you had your two hundredth birthday.”*

“What an obvious lie, far too sore for the eyes. Were you not the one to pass agriculture and rice farming down to Japan?”

“I don’t recall even elves living that long!”

“Can you fight about your ages later?” Kojou interrupted, exasperated. “More importantly, what’s this homunculus repair business?”

Before Yukari could answer Kojou’s question, Kanon let out a gasp.

“Akatsuki...”

“Huh?”

Following her unnerved gaze, Kojou squinted at the back of the lab.

On the other side of a glass wall inside a dimly lit chamber rested a clear, cylindrical tank resembling an aquarium for tropical fish. The interior of the cylinder was filled with blue fluid, and something was floating within.

That something was a small girl.

Inside the water, her long indigo hair floated like seaweed. Her delicate white skin dazzled the eyes.

Aside from the tube supplying her with oxygen, the girl wore nothing on her body. In place of clothes, her skin was covered in bandages. Her slender torso was immobilized with a cast, and the liquid inside the vat was contaminated with blood droplets seeping through.

“Astarte...”

Kojou called out the girl’s name. Floating inside the vat was a homunculus girl

Kojou knew well. Astarte, Natsuki Minamiya's assistant, was asleep after sustaining grave injuries.

"What's the meaning of this?! What happened to Astarte...?!"

"The Order of the End happened," the cat said as Kojou closed the distance.

"What...?!"

"This girl fell into peril while supporting the Island Guard on the night the Order of the End assaulted Keystone Gate...along with Natsuki Minamiya."

"Her Beast Vassal...? Didn't Astarte use her Beast Vassal?" Kojou pressed, bewildered.

Astarte was the world's one and only experimental artificial life-form Beast Vassal symbiote. Even though she was a homunculus, she could summon a Beast Vassal.

Her artificial Beast Vassal, Rhododactylos, was a powerhouse in defensive measures; not even Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor could defeat it with ease. He didn't think the Order of the End could easily hurt her if she'd had her Beast Vassal summoned at the time.

However, Nina coldly shook her head. "The Order of the End's attack cut the Beast Vassal and Astarte both."

"It cut them?"

"Indeed. Astarte was injured by a slash from a sharp bladed weapon."

For a moment, Kojou was so surprised that he forgot all about his anger.

Since Beast Vassals were dense masses of demonic energy, simple physical attacks were virtually worthless against them. Bullets or even cannon shells were probably meaningless. For a mere bladed weapon to penetrate a Beast Vassal and harm its host was virtually impossible. It sounded like nothing short of a bad joke.

"Why are you surprised? Do you not have someone who bears a similar weapon very close to you?" Nina inquired.

"What...?"

Of course Kojou knew that weapon's name. He'd borrowed the strength of its wielder to defeat Astarte's Beast Vassal in the past.

"The Schneewaltzers of the Lion King Agency and Rosen Chevalier Plus," Kensei said. "The principles differ, but these weapons can slice a Beast Vassal apart. After all, they are divine armaments crafted for that very purpose."

A Schneewaltzer, a weapon of the Sword Shamans of the Lion King Agency, could nullify a Beast Vassal's demonic energy, while Rosen Cavalier Plus could slice through space itself.

"And there is another, a weapon one might call the mortal foe of the artificial Beast Vassal Rhododactylos. That would be the demon sword of Gisella—Hauras."

Kojou blinked, staring hard at Kensei. "Did you say...Hauras?"

The current bearer of that weapon was Shizuri Kasugaya. It was utterly impossible for someone with such a stifling, overwhelming sense of justice to harm Astarte. Kojou knew that for a fact, and he was enraged by the assertion that her weapon had hurt someone.

However, the gloomy sorcerous engineer remained calm. "Because it can seize the demonic energy of the opponent it slices and transform this into might for itself, Hauras—or a demonic blade on par with Hauras—can slice Rhododactylos apart. After all, this would mean using Rhododactylos's own demonic energy against it. That is the truth behind the attack that harmed the homunculus."

"A demonic blade on par with... I get it... So the Order of the End must have a Hauras of its own...!"

Kojou's fist trembled. He finally understood the reason why Kensei Kanase had brought him there.

This was a warning. The enemy had a weapon that could slice Rhododactylos apart. There was no guarantee a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor wouldn't meet the same fate. That's what they were warning Kojou about. He couldn't afford to underestimate the Order of the End.

"Can you save Astarte?" Kojou asked.

Nina laughed with a haughty expression. “Who do you think I am? In the name of Nina Adelard, the Great Alchemist of Yore, I shall save this girl without fail.”

“Please.”

“Leave it to me. And while I’m at it, maybe I’ll increase her bust size, too.”

“Uhhh... Maybe show a little restraint. Okay?” Kojou smiled at Nina’s casual words. Kanon smiled a little, too.

Looking up at Astarte as she floated in the vat, the black cat let out a weary sigh. *“By the time I arrived at Keystone Gate, this girl was giving first aid to the wounded Attack Mages despite being gravely wounded and on the brink of death herself. If not for her, Koyomi would have passed away long ago.”*

“That’s the kind of girl she is,” Kojou said. “She’s not cut out for combat in the first place. Even Natsuki knows that, which is why she brought her to our school, to give her as normal a life as possi—”

Kojou’s movements came to an abrupt halt.

He was so unnerved that blood seemed to drain from his entire body. His throat trembled. He couldn’t breathe properly. He cursed his own foolishness for not having noticed such an important thing until that very moment.

“Natsuki...?! What the hell is Natsuki doing?! How could she leave Astarte to go through something like—?”

“Natsuki Minamiya seems to have been consumed,” Yukari said, bereft of emotion.

Kojou was dumbstruck. “What do you mean...consumed?”

“Astarte witnessed the tentacle wielder of the Order of the End taking Natsuki Minamiya into her own body. Her status is unknown.”

“But Natsuki’s...”

“Yes. The Witch of the Void’s true body exists within the other-space created within her own dream. So long as she remains asleep, no one can hurt Natsuki Minamiya in a true sense.”

“Then—!”

Kojou attempted to cling to a sliver of hope, but one cold glare from the black cat stopped him in his tracks.

“However, if the enemy has a spatial magic user even greater than the Witch of the Void, that is another story. Perhaps they are able to use her alter ego in the real world as a ‘key’ with which to invade the Prison Barrier.”

“What would the Order of the End want with the Prison Barrier after all this...?”

“If we knew that, things would be simpler.”

“But if we use this well, we might have a lead for ascertaining their true natures.”

“...A lead?”

“Why do they have someone who wields a demonic blade on par with Hauras? Why do they seek to invade the Prison Barrier? If we learn these reasons, we might be able to determine the Order of the End’s objective.”

“Wow. Not convoluted at all,” Kojou replied with all the sarcasm he could muster.

The black cat seemed to crack a strained smile. *“That is how troublesome this opponent is. You understand that as well, do you not?”*

“...How do we look into this stuff?”

“We’ll take over that part. Information gathering and analysis is the foundation of terrorism countermeasures. This is the Lion King Agency’s area of expertise.”

Since they couldn’t get government permission, Yukari couldn’t request reinforcements from Lion King Agency headquarters, but she could indirectly cooperate through the sharing of information.

It wasn’t a bad proposal by any means. With networks unusable on Itogami Island, it was leaps and bounds more advantageous for them to gather information from the Japanese mainland.

“Got it. Please gather information about The Blood.”

“The Blood...?” The black cat made a dubious wiggle of its whiskers.

Kojou nodded with a bitter expression. “He uses the same Beast Vassals as I do. That has to be a lead.”

“A vampire controlling the same Beast Vassals as the Fourth Primogenitor while claiming to be him? That is a deeply intriguing tale indeed.”

“Save your intrigue for some other time.”

“That certainly constitutes a considerable hint. Very well. We’ll gather what information we can.” The black cat made a leering grin.

“Yeah, I’ll count on you for that part.”

The Order of the End had kept throwing him for a loop, and he didn’t know why. Now, though, he’d finally grabbed ahold of a thread that might allow him to strike back. These were slender hopes, but it was a lot better than having none at all.

“So, Fourth Primogenitor lad, what do you intend to do from this point forward?” Yukari tested him.

“Good question.” Kojou hesitated for a little while.

If he could believe Kensei Kanase’s words about the lab being safe, all he had to do about Astarte was leave her in Nina’s hands. Kojou’s next priority had to be finding Yukina and the others.

“Pops,” Kojou said, turning to Kensei, “can you teleport me as far as Saikai Academy?”

Kensei glared at Kojou with a dour expression. “When did you get the impression you could call me your father?”

“...Hey, I don’t mean it that way! Geez!”

Kensei’s expression morphed into a somber smile. “I am joking.”

Kojou clutched his head in an exaggerated fashion. It was way too hard to figure out when that man was joking.

“But teleportation...” Kensei hesitated. “That is likely futile.”

“Why?”

Kensei looked up at the ceiling with a grave expression on his face.

Dust danced in the air on its way down, and LED lights flickered on and off. There was a dull sound resembling a boom of thunder, faintly shaking the lab building. Itogami Island’s ground was shaking.

“What was that?” Kojou asked.

Kensei shook his head. “A large-scale spatial quake, in all likelihood the Order of the End’s doing.”

“The Order of the End...? And what’s a spatial quake?”

Assaulted by ferocious vertical shaking, Kojou was blown all the way to the edge of the wall. Kanon nearly fell as she tightly embraced the black cat, then Nina.

Kensei turned on a wall-mounted monitor. The image was a display of all of Itogami Island: the blue, tropical sky through which warm rays shined, white clouds, a horde of dense, tightly packed modern buildings... All of them were swaying like a ripple in a pond.

Like raindrops upon the surface of the water, there was a rainbow-colored opening connected to another world. The giant shaking of space covered the whole of Itogami Island. This was the truth behind the tremors shaking the island.

Finally, as if a surface of water had parted, figures appeared out of thin air.

They were human-shaped and clad in all-white robes.

There were hundreds...or perhaps thousands...

Each of them wore upon their heads masks patterned after the skulls of various creatures.

It truly looked like a horde of Grim Reapers had descended upon Itogami Island.

“What is this...?!”

A raspy murmur escaped from Kojou’s lips.

Aftershocks began making the artificial isle tremble once more.

Explosive flames gushed up in the background of the monitor imagery.

Ruler candidates and acolytes of the Order of the End were fighting.

Itogami Island was divided into numerous domains. Ruler candidates were either allies or enemies. And now, thousands of Order of the End acolytes came on the attack.

This conflict was turning into a real war that would burn Itogami Island to cinders.

“What the hell is wrong with you people...?! Order of the End!”

Kojou’s howl echoed throughout the underground lab.

From off in the distance, he felt like he heard the mocking laughter of the handsome boy calling himself The Blood.



CHAPTER FOUR
MY NAME IS KENON

CHAPTER FOUR

My Name Is Kenon

1

Tilting the white porcelain cup, she brought the amber-colored liquid to her mouth. She narrowed her brows. With a grimace of her refined, doll-like face, she shook her head with heavy exasperation.

“Awful.”

Natsuki Minamiya violently hurled the cup away. The golden-haired youth glanced back at her with a constrained expression. He called himself The Blood.

They were in a tearoom of an ancient castle. It was unadorned and windowless. Natsuki and the boy were sitting facing each other across an antique table of beautifully grained wood.

Natsuki was tied to the chair with a long ribbon engraved with a curse. She was currently held captive.

“Does the tea not please you?” the boy asked courteously. “I procured tea leaves of the highest grade that cannot be obtained in the modern era.”

“It tastes worse than Astarte’s piss, and that is putting it kindly. It suits the likes of you very well.” Natsuki laughed haughtily.

Her conduct made the red-eyed girl attending the boy from behind fly into a rage. “You little...!”

Countless black tentacles gushed out from the girl’s white robe.

Each of them wriggled as if a snake with its own independent sentience as the tentacles bore down toward Natsuki. A single attack from the fiendish tentacles could snap Natsuki’s slender neck and mercilessly rend her limb from limb with ease.

Just before the tentacles touched her, their movements stopped.

“What’s wrong? Not going to do it?” Natsuki smiled, staring at the tentacles slick with transparent fluid.

The girl narrowed her red eyes with chagrin.

“You can’t, can you?” Natsuki continued. “It would inconvenience you were I to awaken, would it not?”

“...So you noticed,” the golden-haired boy said gently.

The tentacles writhed around in dissatisfaction as they returned to the girl’s robe.

Even this disgusting sight did not change Natsuki’s expression. If anything, it felt like Natsuki was disappointed that the girl had regained her composure in the end.

“It is an iron rule that the price of a pact is proportional to the power granted to the witch...” Natsuki stirred the tea in front of her as she murmured to herself, “The fact she possesses a Guardian equal to my Rheingold means that the same pact was imposed upon her, namely the role of the warden of a Prison Barrier—am I mistaken, Octo Girl?”

“—!!” With a brief, incoherent snarl, the red-eyed girl stepped closer to Natsuki.

“Cease, Merriloé,” The Blood said sharply. Then he spoke gently to Natsuki, as if trying to soothe her. “I cannot allow you to awaken. I have no intention of repeating the foolish actions of Aya Tokoyogi. The Prison Barrier only has value so long as it remains within your dream.”

Natsuki raised an eyebrow slightly.

The Prison Barrier was an other-space constructed within Natsuki’s own dream.

Like a princess asleep in a castle of thorns, Natsuki remained asleep within her very own dream. And in that other-space where time stood still, she continued to keep vile sorcerous criminals incarcerated. This was the price Natsuki had paid—the price for the pact the young Natsuki had made with a devil in search

of the power to take her revenge.

So long as she remained asleep in that otherworldly prison, no one could hurt Natsuki.

She could not age, she could not be harmed, and she could not perish.

Accordingly, those resentful of Natsuki had exhausted all manner of methods in an attempt to awaken her. After all, so long as Natsuki did not awaken from her dream, it was impossible for the criminals in the Prison Barrier to escape.

However, The Blood had stated that he was not inclined to awaken Natsuki. She found this to be unexpected.

“Tartarus, Cocytus, Yomi, the Castle in the Sky—though called by different names, cursed prisons where even gods were shut for eternity have always existed in every corner of the globe since eras long past. And every such otherworldly prison has always had a single person as its warden—just like you.”

“Warden? Surely you mean ‘pitiful living sacrifice’?” Natsuki retorted.

The boy nodded. “I suppose I do. And these people cannot hope to escape from their prisons. After all, they support the very existence of their prisons. If they left their prisons, the prisons themselves would vanish. If there is no one to dream, the dream shall vanish.”

“And if you destroy me here, my real body will awaken, and the Prison Barrier will vanish as well. Is that why you cannot harm me?”

He nodded again. “More precisely, it would not vanish. With the dream connecting it severed, the contents would be cast out into the real world, but well, the effect is much the same.”

Natsuki curled up one corner of her lips. “If you want to dream that badly, retreat into your own. I know a very good sedative. Or would you rather I sang you a lullaby?”

“That is quite an alluring offer coming from you, but unfortunately, I cannot dream.” The Blood’s shoulders sank. “However, yes, you are correct. It is because I cannot dream that I seek yours. You know about the Collective

Unconscious, do you not?”

Natsuki was unimpressed. “It is the foundation of spells, yes? A common unconsciousness exists across all beings, spanning all peoples and races.”

“Yes, precisely. One method of accessing the Collective Unconscious is through a dream. Put another way, this means that all dreams are *connected to the Collective Unconscious*.”

“What...?”

Natsuki’s expression stiffened. She realized the meaning behind this.

All dreams were connected via the Collective Unconscious—in other words, a prison that existed within a dream was connected to them, and they to it.

“At the bottom of the Prison Barrier is a door of which even you are unaware. A door that links this world to the many otherworldly prisons that existed in the past.”

“Tch... Rheingold!”

Natsuki called out to her Guardian. This was a devil’s vassal granted to a witch, proof of her pact with a devil. It was both the source of a witch’s power, and at the same time, a witch’s overseer.

The Guardian Natsuki had acquired was a giant statue of a knight—a golden, clockwork knight. But.

“Outis!”

A humongous black shadow engulfed the golden knight before it could completely materialize.

The shadow was, in reality, countless tentacles slithering from the girl’s robe. They held Natsuki’s Guardian fast, impeding its materialization.

With Natsuki’s Guardian sealed off, The Blood gently gazed at the contortion of her youthful, beautiful face with a look of pity.

“Merriloé, a warden of a prison just like you, can open this door. The door to liberate the acolytes of the Order of the End captured in the past.”

“The Order of the End... You’ve claimed to serve the true Fourth Primogenitor

since ancient times, correct?” Natsuki grimaced. “All this time, I thought something was off. When the Fourth Primogenitor—when Root finished the duty of defeating Cain the Sinful God, the Devas that created it carved up its body, sealing them into twelve artificial vampires. In spite of this, the legend of the terror of the Fourth Primogenitor never ceased. The Fourth Primogenitor appeared at various points in history, causing chaos and destruction throughout the world.”

“Yes. The Fourth Primogenitor’s name must be a symbol of terror. It must bear overwhelming malice and hatred, existing to burn the world to ash—if not, *their* fate is simply too tragic.”

The boy’s words held weight. Unlike the gentle smile he had worn up to that point, a smirk came over his lips born from madness.

“In the distant past, a group claimed the name of the Fourth Primogenitor and committed acts of large-scale sorcerous terrorism again and again—this is the Order of the End’s true nature, is it?”

“Yes, we have always existed everywhere, at every juncture in history. We’ve ensured that the name of the Fourth Primogenitor, the World’s Mightiest Vampire cursed by the gods themselves, was never, ever forgotten.”

The boy tilted his face toward his own feet.

The next moment, the castle Natsuki and the others were in was savagely shaken.

The girl called Merriloé sent a vast amount of demonic energy coursing through her tentacles. The Prison Barrier was shaking.

The bottommost portion of the Prison Barrier opening, sending a tremor from its door.

The impact also flung open the gate separating Natsuki’s dream from the real world.

“Otherworldly prisons, in which the most fiendish and vile sorcerous criminals are locked away, contain an assembly of Order of the End acolytes from throughout history—I shall release them,” the boy said with complete glee. “They shall be resurrected upon the Itogami Island of this age all at once, so as

to grant people true despair.”

“You are broken, The Blood,” Natsuki spat.

“It is the world that is broken. We are merely returning it to its proper state.”

He stood up and turned his back to Natsuki. *We are done here*, spoke his demeanor.

“What is the Order of the End’s real objective?” Natsuki asked.

“Ahh, how rude of me. I forgot to tell you.” The Blood slowly turned around, his eyes still closed.

“A new ruler shall be chosen. A new king to bring all peoples salvation from despair—a true ruler, not only for this Demon Sanctuary but for the entire world.”

The Blood seemed to melt away into swaying space, all sight of him swallowed by the void.

She felt countless prisoners slipping out of the Prison Barrier’s castle gate, following in his tracks. There were innumerable prisoners clad in white robes, wearing skull masks; nightmares in humanoid form.

Natsuki watched them go in silence.

She was utterly helpless, as before, unable to do a thing.

2

The sudden, abrupt rainfall characteristic of Itogami Island lifted, and a vivid dusk sky spread forth.

The red-dyed sky was the background as a horde of individuals became visible upon the rooftops.

From a distance, they appeared to be a group of powerful men organized akin to an army. There were close to a hundred people in all. It was probably the biggest group of demons on Itogami Island.

“So they’re already on the move. Fast.” Yaze sighed with irritation as he

peered through a spare pair of binoculars from the school.

The retreat of the alliance of four ruler candidates from the Tensou Academy Domain, resulting in it shooting up in the rankings, was about two hours prior. It was easy to imagine that other forces did not look upon Yume's precipitous acquisition of power with amusement. Nor was it hard to guess that others would emerge to beat her down before she became an even greater menace.

All that said, even he hadn't expected them to move with this kind of speed. Perhaps they thought to smash Yume and company before they could regroup from exhaustion incurred during the fighting.

"The group using the home improvement center parking lot as a forward base is the Sanctuary Liberation Front commandeth by Lionel Yoshitani, second place in the rankings," Lydianne reported from her tank. *"Formed around a core of former Island Guard demon soldiers, they are in the running for the top ranking. In quality of troops, they are mightiest among all the domains."*

The title *former Island Guard* raised a murmur among the students inside the command tent.

Even if the Order of the End had easily sent them packing, the Island Guard was formed of anti-demon combat professionals. With their command structure fractured, they had their backs to the wall and had been virtually annihilated as a unified force, but most Guardsmen were still fighting valiantly on every corner of Itogami Island trying to protect the populace.

However, some members had abandoned their duties to participate in the Electoral War. The Sanctuary Liberation Front was a group of such corrupted former Guardsmen.

Just having such a group set eyes upon them was dangerous enough, but what made it even worse was that the Sanctuary Liberation Front was not the only group targeting Tensou Academy. There was an enemy ruler in sight on the opposite edge of a canal, directly across from the SLF's camp at the home improvement center.

"Who're they?" Yaze asked.

Lydianne turned around the tank's main camera. *"The Paradise Company*

Domain, fourth place in the rankings. They seemeth to be merely observing for the moment. The ruler candidate is President Hakusan Shitara, a dwarf, so he mayeth be the type to solve problems with money rather than force of arms."

"...So if he sees an opening, he plans to take us down from behind? Disgusting bastard." Yaze clicked his tongue with a touch of scorn.

Perhaps that candidate planned to let Tensou Academy and the Island Guard duke it out and then launch an attack when both sides were depleted. Such efficient methods really did suit a merchant.

Lydianne concurred with Yaze's impressions from within her tank. *"Indeed. The Paradise Company is a business rival of Didier Heavy Industries."*

Yaze's face soured further. "I see. So they're used to civil conflicts."

A business rival of Didier Heavy Industries meant that the Paradise Company was an arms trader. Naturally, they would have a vast amount of war-related know-how, too. They'd pay for it if they thought of the firm as a simple import/export company.

"Whatcha gonna do, li'l ruler? Go and smack them around first?" Ki asked without the slightest hint of tension in his voice.

He was lying under the command tent, stuffing his cheeks with a tasty snack allotted to him. It was a cupcake baked by an ordinary Tensou Academy student in the home economics classroom. It was a special privilege from being in a domain that was chiefly a girls' school.

"We can do no such thing." Yume looked back at Ki with a cheeky, irritated expression. "Our opponent is a large-scale domain with ten thousand subjects. In numbers of combat-capable demons and their equipment, they far outstrip us. We cannot attack them and leave the domain's defenses thin."

"One volley from Leviathan and you could mop this up in an instant." Ki took another gulp of snacks.

Yume glared at him.

"They acknowledge this as well, which is why they employ the commercial facility as a shield," Lydianne said with a laugh, trying to mediate.

The home improvement center the Sanctuary Liberation Front was using as a base was an important supply depot for supplies needed for day-to-day life in Island West. If they carelessly attacked and damaged it, there would be profound consequences for Itogami City residents. To gain the support of subjects, it was necessary to leave the structure unscathed. As a result, Yume's trump card, naval bombardment, had been sealed away.

"I have to say, this is getting a little boring," Zana cut in. She sounded displeased while she dangled a knuckle weapon from a finger and twirled it around. "Can't they hurry up and attack? Or do they plan to just glare at us forever, I wonder?"

"I'm pretty sure they're waiting for nightfall," Ki said.

Zana appeared mystified. "Night?"

"Whether beast people or vampires, their real strengths come out at night. In contrast, our li'l ruler's bedtime is nine o'clock at night, yes?"

"Dorm lights are turned off at ten PM!" Yume retorted, tired of being treated like a child.

Yaze wearily touched a hand to the back of his head. Setting the bedtime part aside, it was plain that a prolonged battle was to the Tensou Academy Domain's disadvantage. Besides Ki and Zana, everyone was tired from the combat during the day, and more importantly, their combat strength was overwhelmingly thin.

"What'll you do? Take a nap now while you have the chance?" Nagisa asked out of consideration for Yume.

Yume frailly shook her head. "But the enemy might well launch a surprise attack so..."

Her sense of responsibility as a ruler candidate was getting in the way and stopping her from saying she needed rest. But if Yume's endurance was whittled away like that, they'd be playing right into the Sanctuary Liberation Front's hands regardless.

Maybe we should insist she rest, thought Yaze as his mind began to wander.

Suddenly, Lydianne's tank gave off a piercing sound of alarm.

Instinctively sensing that something was wrong, Yaze subconsciously looked overhead.

The dusk sky was dyed red. That sky swayed like the surface of the sea during a night storm. There was a dazzling flash of light. The sky was covered in a rainbow-colored aurora.

“How mysterious...,” Lydianne said. Unable to bear the tank’s onboard sensors pleading in unison, Lydianne muted the alarm sounds.

“Yazecchi... What’s that?!” Nagisa exclaimed, anxiously waiting for his answer.

Yaze vaguely shook his head. “A teleport...maybe?”

Ki stepped in, turning serious for a moment despite licking a cupcake wrapper. “No...it’s not. It’s a gate between two interconnected worlds.”

Yaze looked at him in surprise. “Interconnected worlds? You don’t mean... Natsuki’s Prison Barrier?”

“I see. The Witch of the Void was on this island, wasn’t she?” Ki made a heavy nod. “But it doesn’t seem these are mere escaped convicts.”

“...Huh?”

Yaze stared up at the sky once more.

The rainbow aurora was pouring down on all of Itogami Island like rain. Countless figures emerged, slipping out from that curtain of light.

The Prison Barrier was an otherworldly prison constructed inside Natsuki Minamiya’s dream. If that gate was open, the figures emerging from within had to be fiendish sorcerous criminals that no normal penitentiary could hold.

However, the appearances of those who emerged from thin air differed from what Yaze had imagined.

Some were tall. Some were short. Some were humanoid. Some were shaped very differently. Their appearances varied, but they all had two things in common: their white robes and their animal skull–motif masks.

“Those masks...! The Order of the End...?!”

Yaze turned a ghastly pale. The people emerging from the void gate were

without a doubt wearing Order of the End outfits. They numbered in the hundreds, if not the thousands.

All at once, they fluttered down toward Itogami Island, gazing at their surroundings from up high through their creepy-looking masks.

Island West, where Yaze and the others were located, was no exception. Several of the acolytes landed inside Tensou Academy school grounds.

Others landed at the camp of the Sanctuary Liberation Front targeting Tensou Academy.

“*What...?!*” Lydianne let out a bewildered cry as a massive explosion occurred inside the home improvement center parking lot where the SLF had set up camp.

Unit members caught in the explosion were rolling on the ground and on fire. The Order of the End had made a move.

“The Order of the End’s attacking the Sanctuary Liberation Front?” Yaze muttered to no one in particular, and none replied to his question.

Ferocious combat had broken out all over Itogami Island. The Order of the End acolytes were assaulting subjects near where they had emerged, and the ruler candidates of those domains counterattacked as a consequence.

“Are they attacking indiscriminately...?!” Yaze’s voice trembled as he gazed at the flames continuing to rise up all over the place within the island.

The screens of every monitor placed inside the tent switched off all at once.

In the center of the blacked-out screens, the first things that popped up were characters that read, CONGRATULATIONS! The next sentence displayed continued with, MOVE ON TO THE NEXT STAGE.

Nagisa anxiously peered at the monitors. “The next stage...? What does that mean?”

Within those screens, the form of a small-statured, beautiful boy emerged. He had golden hair like a shimmering flame—The Blood. He began speaking.

“To all those aspiring to be Itogami Island’s new ruler.”

His eyes remained closed as he smiled in amusement.

“Now the real Electoral War begins. However, the rules have not changed. I have merely raised the difficulty ever so slightly. Your duty is to protect your own subjects while robbing opposing ruler candidates of their domains and subjects.”

The Blood’s speech was airing all over Itogami Island from every broadcast device on the isle. Naturally, most of the city residents were anxiously listening. The Blood seemed to find this amusing as he continued.

“However, you must not be careless. My Order of the End acolytes are assaulting the subjects of all domains without distinction. Powerless rulers who cannot protect their subjects are not qualified to rule Itogami Island.”

“Lady Yume!” Lydianne shouted before The Blood had even finished his speech.

Yume was already on the move. The Order of the End’s acolytes were indiscriminately attacking subjects.

“Council President! Please call everyone in the domain and have them take shelter inside the Tensou Academy school building!” Yume instructed.

“U-understood.”

The high school girl began preparing for an in-school broadcast. She was trying to organize a general mobilization of students to guide surrounding residents to shelter.

Tensou Academy Domain’s fighting strength was insufficient to protect the entire domain from the Order of the End’s assault. There was no guarantee they’d be safe inside the school, either, but it was far better than remaining out in the city.

“Lydianne, confirm the locations of the acolytes that appeared inside the domain! And request assistance for a counterattack from demons in our affiliated domains!”

“Aye! Consider it done!” Lydianne nodded with her tank.

Busting up the alliance of candidates that morning meant that the scope of

Yume's ruled domains had broadened considerably. This meant the demons under her command had increased, but whether demons who had surrendered a scant two hours before would obey Yume's orders was anyone's guess.

"This ain't good. There's just too damned many of them..." Yaze muttered under his breath. "Can't defend against all that."

Sending the Order of the End acolytes packing without sacrificing the citizens of Itogami Island was despairingly difficult, and that was putting it lightly.

On top of that, it wasn't just the Tensou Academy Domain in a perilous position. The Order of the End considered all residents of Itogami Island to be targets for attack.

Amid that situation, Ki, supposedly having nothing to do with any of this, for some reason sank into thought with a serious expression on his face.

"Hey, Zana... What do you think about this?"

"Hmm... It does feel a little off." Making a small, sexy gesture, Zana tilted her head.

"Off... What's off?" Yaze asked.

Butting into a conversation between the First Primogenitor and his partner was a terrifying act unthinkable under any set of norms, but for whatever reason, he didn't feel like he needed to hold back. Maybe the pair just acted too naturally. The possibility that the enemy was so overly formidable that it had numbed Yaze's senses also ran rather high.

"It's, like, they're totally all over the place. Style-wise, I mean."

Yaze had no idea what she was saying whatsoever. "Style?"

Ki stepped in to elaborate. "With spells, there are quirks and fads. Even for spells that have the same effects, Japan's ritualists and Western sorcerous engineers differ in the tools and rituals they employ. It's not just a matter of countries or peoples, either—styles of magic change according to the era. It's the same for demons like beast people, too. For example, these days beast people don't roar when they bestialize, 'cause that'll only make them a target for snipers. Intimidating people with your size was in vogue up to the Middle

Ages where fighting was done mainly with swords.”

“Even with vampire Beast Vassals, there are fads that go out of style in every era.” Zana pointed toward urban areas as she spoke.

Beast Vassals summoned by the Order of the End were attacking a unit of the Sanctuary Liberation Front on the street close to the home improvement center. Of course, these were Beast Vassals Yaze was unfamiliar with.

“Bloodlines and affinities differ, but on a basic level, the form a Beast Vassal takes is the product of the host’s mental image. There’s the Four Great Elements fad, the Physical Attack Type Revival—about three centuries separated the two.”

“Okaaaay...”

Naturally, hearing the words didn’t mean Beast Vassal fads rang a bell with Yaze. These were probably subtle differences that a beginner just couldn’t pick up on. Regardless, that wasn’t the crux of the matter.

“So what you mean by the styles being all over the place is that...”

“These acolytes *aren’t from the same era*. Right, there’s a little something I want to confirm—”

Ki nonchalantly shifted his gaze behind him. Yaze looked back in turn.

Of the acolytes pouring down from the rainbow-colored aurora onto the Tensou Academy school site, one appeared upon the school building’s roof. He wasn’t even thirty meters from the command tent Yaze and the others were in.

Nagisa let out a small scream; Yume blanched and went on guard. Lydianne urgently whirled her tank about, training the barrels of her machine guns onto the acolyte.

But Ki’s attack was swifter.

He released an invisible shock wave with a thrust of his fist, and the acolyte’s mask was smashed apart. With just the release of the demonic energy riding his fist, the acolyte some thirty meters away was sent flying.

With his mask broken, the acolyte’s figure was enveloped by a rainbow-colored radiance once more.

His contours shimmered like a mirage, finally dissipating without a sound. The only things left were the concrete from where Ki's attack had gouged the rooftop and fragments of the broken mask.

Ki waved his hand dismissively. "It's just like I thought. These people don't properly exist in this era and world. They're just borrowing power from those masks in awful taste to temporarily materialize."

Yaze was still standing in a daze as he looked back at the nonchalant First Primogenitor. "Then, if we break their masks—"

"They'll be forced back into the Prison Barrier. But they know that. You won't be able to break their masks that easily. Might be faster to just kill 'em all to save us trouble down the road."

"You're the only one who thinks that's faster...!" Yaze groaned. He shifted his attention to the sky.

The sky far above Itogami Island was still swaying like the surface of the sea as the rainbow aurora continued spitting out acolytes of the Order of the End.

During that time, several more landed within the Tensou Academy Domain.

"Baby Yume! Tanker!"

"I told you to please cease calling me that!" Yume complained.

"So we commence our destruction of the masks. Aye!"

Yume leaped off the roof, taking the demon beasts with her. The demon beasts under her control made a coordinated assault on the acolytes, ripping off and destroying their masks.

Lydianne switched her machine guns to rubber bullets and began to snipe the acolytes.

Neutralizing acolytes was no easy feat; they were highly capable in combat, but if all Lydianne had to do was destroy their masks, she could handle that.

The number of acolytes appearing inside the domain steadily decreased, and an air of relief began to flow inside the headquarters.

"This gonna work...?"

Watching Yume's efforts through the fence bordering the rooftop, Yaze let slip an optimistic murmur.

As if to make sport of his utterance, a fresh explosion erupted behind Yaze. It came from the Tensou Academy Domain's border, in the direction of the canal connecting the artificial isles.

A group had demolished a tall wall enveloping Tensou Academy to invade it. These were not Order of the End acolytes. It was a mixed unit of beast people and vampires clad in black suits as if they were someone's bodyguards.

"The Paradise Company! To think they would invade a domain at this precise moment...!" Lydianne exclaimed.

A ruler candidate higher in the rankings with the Tensou Academy Domain in his sights had slipped in during the Order of the End attack to launch a surprise assault.

Their target was not the school building Yaze and the others were at but rather an urban area at one corner of the domain.

There, a young girl could be seen at the head of the demon beasts fresh on the heels of retreating acolytes.

Yaze and Nagisa both shouted.

"Dammit! Their target's—"

"Yume!"

If their ruler candidate were to fall, the Tensou Academy Domain would be picked apart. The candidate of the Paradise Company had been eagerly eyeing the exact moment Yume was isolated within the chaos of combat.

Yume realized an enemy was approaching, and she whirled around. Fleeing was impossible now.

The beast people of the Paradise Company eliminated the demon beasts protecting Yume. Confirming this, the vampires summoned Beast Vassals one after another.

The gunnery from Lydianne's tank had no effect upon beast people.

Yume could only open her eyes wide in fright, watching rooted to the spot as the enemy Beast Vassals neared.

With a brief click of his tongue, Ki began raising his right hand, but he stopped halfway.

He'd spotted a figure suddenly descending from the heavens to stand before Yume in her moment of peril.

This was a black-haired, small-statured girl. She wore a Saikai Academy uniform and gripped a silver-colored spear in her hands. With finely polished movements akin to dancing steps, she beautifully twirled her spear about, thrusting it into the horde of Beast Vassals.

The Beast Vassals let out agonized roars, with demonic energy flames scattering from them like fresh blood as they vanished.

Yume called out the girl's name in surprise. "Miss Yukina...?!"

"Are you all right, Yume?" Yukina Himeragi smiled with relief as she confirmed that Yume was safe and sound. "On the way here, I had to be wary of your pursuers noticing me. I am glad I made it in time."

"Miss..."

Tears were welling in Yume's eyes. Her fear of being killed by Beast Vassals, and the heavy weight of a ruler candidate continuing to hold up a domain all by herself—these pressed down on her all at once, preventing her from being able to hold her emotions in check.

"It is all right now. We will protect you."

"Yes...!"

Yume brusquely wiped her tears away. Then, a questioning look immediately came over her face. She apparently had misgivings about Yukina's use of the plural *we*.

However, Yume's misgivings immediately melted away.

Fresh reinforcements arrived, following in Yukina's wake. A girl appeared, also wearing a Saikai Academy uniform.

Her white hair danced in the wind, and she gripped a crimson long sword. Turning her blade, which resembled a flickering flame, toward the Paradise Company combat personnel, she boldly introduced herself.

“I am ruler of the Saikai Academy Domain, Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella! I have come to aid you in the name of justice!”

“Eh...?”

Yume voiced her bewilderment at the appearance of a ruler candidate unfamiliar to her.

However, the chaos among the Paradise Company was far greater.

With their Beast Vassals having been annihilated in seconds, the vampires had completely lost all will to fight. The subsequent appearance of an unusually confident ogre girl shook the psyche of the remaining beast people.

To begin with, the failure of their initial surprise attack meant they had no reason to continue fighting. And so, the combat personnel of the Paradise Company turned their backs to Shizuri and ran; it was every person for themselves.

Shizuri swung her crimson long sword as she chased after the fleeing assailants. The spectacle made it difficult to tell just who had assaulted whom.

“Somehow, we made it...” Yaze was still crouching against the fence bordering the rooftop as he slumped, drained of strength.

The First Primogenitor and his partner were right beside Yaze, bouncing amused conversation between them.

“Hee-hee... So that girl really is the Fourth Primogenitor’s companion.” As Zana murmured, her gaze was trained upon Yukina, lowering her spear at the time.



“Don’t break her yet, Zana. I’ll run out of playmates,” Ki said.

“Hmmm, what to do?” The beautiful redhead smiled teasingly back at him. Then, she turned her eyes toward the other ruler candidate besides Yume. “Hey, more importantly, isn’t that girl...?”

“A white-haired ogre...and with Hauras, at that?” Ki narrowed his eyes upon Shizuri and the long sword she wielded.

Sharp, gleaming fangs poked between the lips with which he made an impetuous smile.

“That’s a Demon Sanctuary for you. No boredom here. It was well worth coming all this way.”

As Yaze overheard this, he realized that the tips of his own fingers were trembling.

It was the first time he’d felt true terror from the vampire primogenitor before him.

3

The impact from the explosion was conveyed to the lowest strata of the artificial isle. Irregular beats, almost sounding like they were coming from percussion instruments, were likely gunshots from automatic small arms. The armed Guardsmen on security detail were fighting the assailants.

Kensei Kanase glanced overhead. “It would seem the acolytes of the Order of the End have come here as well.” He took a sip of his cold coffee.

His demeanor, unchanged, left Kojou nervously shouting. “This is no time to be calm! Astarte’s in the middle of treatment. If they nail this building’s power supply, that’ll be really freaking bad! Professor Kitty, where’s the exit?!”

“Follow me.”

The black cat motioned with her chin and walked off. Just before following out of the room, Kojou looked back at the homunculus girl sleeping inside the vat.

“Kanase, Nina, take care of Astarte!”

“Yes, Akatsuki!”

“Leave it to me.”

After checking to ensure Kanon and Nina had nodded, Kojou exited the lab for real this time.

Running up the emergency stairs of bulwarks solid enough to be found in a prison, he finally arrived at the lab’s front lobby to find it in quite a state. The glass doors had been shattered into fine pieces, and bullet holes pockmarked the walls. The air was filled with the choking scent of blood, and wounded armed Guardsmen lay amid the rubble.

Emerging from the center of the lobby was an Order of the End acolyte wearing a sheep skull mask. The acolyte under it was probably a sorcerer. The armed Guardsmen’s gunfire had no effect upon the powerful defensive barrier protecting the acolyte.

Then, the acolyte traced a huge magic circle in front of its own eyes.

It was a gun barrel shaped like a tuning fork woven from magical energy. Even someone as ill-versed in magical theory as Kojou instinctively understood that this was the prelude to a powerful magical attack.

“This is bad! C’mon over, Mesarthim Adamas!”

The completed magic circle released a beam of light about the same time Kojou’s Beast Vassal manifested. Countless diamond crystals blocked the acolyte’s cannon attack from the front, bouncing it back toward the acolyte that had cast it.

“...?!”

Enveloped by the blazing beam, the acolyte vanished without even being able to raise a scream.

However, the overly powerful counterattack of Kojou’s Beast Vassal did not end there. The crystals shot out in reaction to the cannon attack proceeded to half destroy the lab’s outer wall, boring holes in the ceiling of the artificial isle underground district.

The chain reaction of damage spread even to surrounding unrelated buildings, causing flames to gush up here and there within the district. The surviving armed Guardsmen had dumbfounded expressions as they gazed at the ridiculous spectacle. The silent, reproachful gazes from the people whose lives Kojou had purportedly saved were downright painful.

The black cat mounted on Kojou's shoulder sighed. Yukari was at her wit's end. *"Just what will happen if you destroy the building, Fourth Primogenitor boy?"*

"It's not like I'm trying to do that!"

As if attracted by this, fresh acolytes of the Order of the End approached Kojou. Kojou's expression was marred by unease. Kojou's Beast Vassals weren't suited for urban combat. They were far too powerful for pinpoint attacks against human-sized targets.

"Goodness. Don't move a muscle." The black cat shook her head and quietly raised a paw.

Twelve spheres appeared in front of her, each changing into a tapered arrow. These were arrows of light spun from pure spiritual energy. Spirit Archery was the specialty of the elf named Yukari Endou.

Releasing the twelve arrows of light without a sound, these precisely impaled the masks of twelve acolytes. Their masks lost, the acolytes' contours became vague before they vanished, swallowed by the void.

"This kitty's really strong..."

Kojou curled his tongue in shock at Yukari's overwhelming fighting strength. Just the fact she was remotely controlling a familiar from the Japanese mainland was surprising enough; sending Order of the End acolytes packing in that state outstripped anyone's notion of common sense. Now he truly understood why Yukina was afraid of her master.

Yukari watched the mask fragments fall to the ground, going hmph through her nose. *"It is indeed just as I thought."*

"What is?"

“These masks, which are in terrible taste, by the way, are magical devices. They exist as an anchor of sorts to keep them tethered to this world.”

“...They’re an anchor?” Kojou didn’t quite follow, but he got the gist; it was a magical catalyst of some sort.

“They are not people of this era. Acolytes from the Order of the End imprisoned in bygone eras are being summoned from the Prison Barrier by force. That is where this huge army comes from.”

“Acolytes from other eras...? Wait, I can see almost a thousand people, y’know?! And that’s just what’s on screen!” Kojou picked up a cracked mask, grimacing with doubts on his face. “Did Natsuki capture all of them?”

“It was not the work of Natsuki Minamiya alone. Since long ago, there have been enough otherworldly prisons dotting the globe to boggle the mind.”

Kojou never would have expected that.

“And,” Yukari continued, “they are all connected at the deepest parts of their foundations. The Order of the End whisked away Natsuki Minamiya to open that door. It is a feat no normal demon or sorcerer could accomplish. There is probably a witch among the enemy. An administrator of a prison just like the Witch of the Void—”

“So the point is, smash the masks and that’s that?”

Kojou, who’d lost track of what she was saying, double-checked what he had to do then and there. The various acolytes of the Order of the End were powerful foes, but if smashing their masks was enough, that made things a lot easier.

“That may drive them off temporarily,” the cat said, squashing his hopes. “However, should they acquire new masks, they shall return again and again. It is not a lasting solution.”

“Then what should I do?!”

“They are using a route to the current Prison Barrier in order to summon these ghosts from the past. You need to merely close that route.”

“That’s why I’m asking you what I should—”

Kojou cut himself off with a gasp. He was staring overhead.

Kojou had previously seen a spectacle similar to the swaying space covering the sky. It was the same sight as back when the giant fortress known as the Prison Barrier had escaped from Natsuki Minamiya's control, appearing off Itogami Island.

"...I see. All I need to do is get Natsuki back."

"It amounts to that, yes." The black cat made an exaggerated nod. *"Normally, it is quite a chore merely to reach an otherworldly prison, but conveniently for you, the door is currently thrown wide open. If you have a sorcerer employing spatial control, flying into it is not a difficult prospect. What say you, Kensei Kanase?"*

The former palace sorcerous engineer, arriving at the top of the stairs that very moment, was gloomy. "Good grief... You say it like it is so easy, Yukari Endou."

It wasn't so much that he'd come to check on them as that he'd realized it, too: His spatial control magic was indispensable if this perilous situation was to be set straight.

"Thanks to the door being jammed open, the Prison Barrier is in a rather unstable state. I can go through the trouble of getting you inside, but I cannot promise I can safely bring you back," Kensei warned.

Kojou shrugged in silence. He sure didn't like the idea of going to a frightening place like an otherworldly prison, but it wasn't the time to say something like that.

"Were it possible, I would like to accompany you, but unfortunately, this body is a familiar being remotely controlled," Yukari said with concern. *"I leave this in your hands, Fourth Primogenitor boy."*

Even with Yukari's power, the interior of the Prison Barrier was beyond the effective range for controlling her familiar.

Well, I can't argue with that, thought Kojou with a nod.

"Please stay here and protect Kanase and the others," he said. "I'll manage

somehow. Basically, I've gotta send that Order of the End witch flying, right?"

"Well, I imagine that sort of thing is your strong suit." The black cat looked pleased. He wasn't really sure if she was praising or belittling him.

Kojou slapped his cheeks to psych himself up and spoke to Kensei. "Do it, Pops."

Kensei let out a weighty breath. "You have no business calling me your father."

"Er... I mean..."

"Legally speaking, neither you nor Kanon are old enough to marry yet."

"...Huh? What? What are you talkin' about?"

Kensei's somehow profound-sounding words confused Kojou.

Heedless of Kojou's reaction, Kensei maintained a stoic look as he traced a magic circle on the ground.

He was opening a teleportation gate.

After he completed the detailed magic circle in the blink of an eye, the surrounding scenery swayed. In Kojou's vision, this overlapped with a familiar-looking fortress as if it was some kind of illusion.

"Thou shalt not—!"

"What?!"

Suddenly, right on the verge of the teleportation spell activating completely, Kojou was struck by an impact from the side.

A huge fireball rained down on the laboratory lobby, causing a tremendous explosion.

Bathed in the blast wind at point-blank range, Kensei's body was sent flying.

The magic circle around Kojou vanished, thus canceling the teleportation. The ferociously unpleasant feeling similar to car sickness drove Kojou onto his knees, whereupon he was assaulted by a new explosive impact that seemed deliberately sent after him.

In truth, this was an attack by Order of the End acolytes.

Only two acolytes had appeared. He recognized the masks they wore.

One mask had a motif like a reptilian demon beast; the other was patterned after the skull of a bull. They were from the initial acolytes who had attacked Kojou and company on the sub-float—part of The Blood’s inner circle.

“Kensei Kanase!”

The black cat tried to rush over to where the wounded sorcerous engineer had fallen. But before the cat could, a beautiful blond boy stood before him.

The sight of him made Kojou doubt his own eyes. The boy who was supposedly the last boss of the Electoral War was standing before Kojou’s very eyes. He’d brought a mere two acolytes with him.

The boy kept his eyelids closed as he spoke with a gentle tone of voice. “If possible, I would have preferred not to meet you like this again, but it cannot be helped. I cannot allow you to release Natsuki Minamiya yet.”

His aura was serene, with no malice evident whatsoever. However, he was the mastermind who’d plotted this war, wrapping Itogami Island in a vortex of conflict.

“The Bloood!!”

Standing up, Kojou surrounded his entire body with a crimson mist imbued with demonic energy.

All troublesome thoughts of strategy vanished from Kojou’s head. For The Blood, ever elusive, to show up in person was unexpectedly good fortune.

If Kojou could defeat him here, the Electoral War would be over. It was a once-in-a-lifetime chance.

“Professor Kitty, take care of Kanase’s dad!”

Kojou charged toward the boy, who awaited him with a handsome smile. The Blood thrust his right hand out. Incredible demonic energy swirled within the palm of his hand.

They were a scant few meters apart. Both simultaneously summoned their

Beast Vassals at point-blank range.

The clash of enormous demonic energies made the very air crack.

The impact shook the ground of the artificial isle, and countless tornadoes blew surrounding buildings away.

4

“Yukina! I’m so glad! I was worried!”

Greeting Yukina and the others as they came up to the school building was Nagisa, who was wearing a Tensou Academy blazer. She ran to Yukina and grabbed her in a tight hug.

Yukina strongly hugged her back. “I am glad you are safe, Nagisa. You are not hurt?”

“I have bandages plastered all over me... Ah, keep this secret from Kojou, ‘kay?”

“Yeah.”

Watching as Nagisa pointed to her scraped kneecaps, Yukina’s expression loosened from relief.

It wasn’t a situation justifying a single shred of optimism, but she felt that meeting Nagisa had considerably lightened her mood. Yukina felt that the girl named Nagisa Akatsuki was mysteriously talented at relieving the stress in others.

After taking a moment to savor her delight over reuniting with Nagisa, Yukina surveyed the area. Her eyes bulged as her expression stiffened, for she’d noticed a tall, foreign man sitting cross-legged on the school building’s roof. Beside him was a woman with mature beauty she remembered seeing before.

“Um... Yaze... Why are they...?”

Suppressing her presence, Yukina backed away to Yaze, who was slumped against a fence on the roof. Yaze shook his head with a pained expression.

“I don’t really know, either. For starters, seems they ain’t our enemies for the

time being.”

“Ah, I see...”

Yukina fell silent. Ki Juranbarada was paying no attention to her as he stuffed his cheeks with a delicious-looking hamburger from an MAR supply bag. Zana Lashka made a pained smile as she wiped some mustard off his cheek.

Yukina felt a light headache coming on as she covered her eyes with a hand.

She’d known the First Primogenitor was visiting Itogami Island, but even she hadn’t expected to find him eating a hamburger on the rooftop of an all-girls school. On top of that, he seemed to be cooperating with Yume to protect the Tensou Academy Domain. Yukina didn’t have a single clue how to react at a time like this.

Yukina was still completely at a loss as someone reluctantly followed her with weighty steps.

When Yukina looked back, she saw Shizuri behind her, head lowered, seemingly very uncomfortable.

“Miss Kasugaya?”

“Um, I’d like to speak to the girl named Yume Eguchi...,” Shizuri said meekly as she intertwined her fidgety left and right index fingers. Her cheeks were faintly reddened. As someone who knew her personally, such an unexpected look on her face left Yukina tempted to burst out in laughter.

“Um, do you have some kind of business with me?”

“Hyaa...?! ”

When a voice abruptly called out to her from behind, the already nervous Shizuri let out a shrill cry.

Standing right beside Yukina and Shizuri was a young girl wearing a Tensou Academy uniform. It was an elementary schooler with an adorable face, her appearance reminiscent of a temperamental cat.

“Y-you are the ruler of this domain?”

“Yes, I am Eguchi,” Yume replied with perfect politeness. Taking off the beret

she wore and holding it against her chest, she bowed deeply and courteously toward Shizuri. “You are Shizuri Kasugaya of Saikai Academy Domain, yes? Thank you very much for saving me at such a perilous moment earlier. You have my thanks as representative of the Tensou Academy Domain.”

“Ah... Uh... Wa...wait a—What is the meaning of this, Yukina Himeragi?!”

Shizuri grabbed Yukina’s arm, yanked her close, and spoke to her in a tiny voice. Yukina looked back at the sight of Shizuri fiercely consternated with a questioning air.

“What is the matter? Is there a problem?”

“This girl is ridiculously cute! She’s a little cheeky, but she’s levelheaded, she can greet people properly, also she’s small and dainty, and her cheeks look really soft; her skin is all glossy, too!”

“Umm, well... I understand why you find her cute.”

I understand how she feels, but she is still too excited about this, thought Yukina.

“I am sorry for being cheeky. I hear that a lot.” Yume lowered her head in quite an adultlike demeanor.

Shizuri urgently shook her head. “Y-you are mistaken. I did not mean that in a bad way just now; I mean that in the sense you are reliable—everything I could wish for in an ally!”

“An...ally?” Yume looked back at Shizuri with bewilderment.

Lydianne dismounted from her tank and joined the conversation, clearly in favor of the idea. “I see, to form an alliance with Saikai Academy Domain is a fortuitous idea. She has indeedeth been through many battles, and Lady Shizuri is seeneth as a trustworthy ruler candidate.”

As if to underpin her words, an affirming atmosphere began to course among the other students remaining in the command tent. Shizuri saving Yume before their eyes was a major factor, an exploit sufficient for the people of Tensou Academy to trust Shizuri.

“But how does one form an alliance?” Yume asked.

It was a reasonable question. Yukina and Shizuri glanced at each other's faces, conflicted. It was their first experience with an alliance as well, so they didn't know the tangible details.

"You shall activate the Ruler App and read forth the secondary barcode from the participating ally's screen," Lydianne explained.

Yaze wearily shook his head as Lydianne politely assisted them in operating the app. "...That's one hell of a design. It looks like friend requests for a video game...?"

With awkward handiwork, Shizuri and Yume operated their applications, and after repeated trial and error, they succeeded in forming a mutual alliance.

Of course, since this wasn't a video game, forming an alliance didn't mean anything had changed to the naked eye. Nor was there some change in their outfits or some sort of gaudy fanfare playing in the background.

Nonetheless, the effects of forming the alliance were immediately apparent.

The communication system of Lydianne's tank suddenly received a message.

"Ohh, Lady Empress!"

Climbing into the tank's cockpit, Lydianne raised her voice when she saw the icon for the sender. Coursing from the tank's external speakers was Asagi's voice, which Yukina knew so well.

"Ahh... Testing, testing. Seems like I finally got through. You hearing this, Tanker?"

"I am indeed hearing you! Lady Empress, art thou in good health?!"

"From the fact I got through, it seems like Kasugaya arrived there safe and sound."

"...Lady Empress?"

Bewilderment clouded Lydianne's expression. Considering that they'd finally made contact, Asagi's demeanor was strange. She didn't pick up on Lydianne's tone of voice over the terrible background noise entering the signal.

No, this wasn't background noise. It was the sound of an explosion.

Aftereffects from blast winds made sounds tremble through the microphone. Shrieking voices could be heard in the distance. Being in the middle of evacuating might have accounted for Asagi's breath being labored. Combat was taking place near her.

"Tanker...please. Tell Himeragi and Kasugaya...you mustn't come back to Saikai Academy. Look for Kojou, rendezvous with him, and..."

The state of the transmission worsened, and Asagi's voice grew distant, mixed in with the sound of glass panels breaking.

"The Order of the End isn't the only enemy... The real goal of the Electoral War is..."

Asagi's voice became progressively more broken until it finally cut out altogether.

Lydianne operated her communication system with urgency, but Asagi did not respond to her calls. The only thing she heard over the speakers was the sound of ferocious static.

"What on earth...? What could this mean?" Shizuri muttered as she stared at her own smartphone. She tried Rui's and Yuno's numbers one after the other, but they didn't reply, either. She bit her lip in concern.

"Was it attacked by the Order of the End?" Yaze asked.

Yukina firmly shook her head. "While she is at Saikai Academy, Aiba is able to employ The Cleansing, and Ms. Sasasaki is there as well. I do not think they would be easily bested, even if the Order of the End is their opponent. Besides —"

Yaze's expression grew graver still. "She said the enemy isn't just the Order of the End. What the heck does that mean?"

Yukina shook her head again; she did not have an answer. When it came to enemies beyond the Order of the End, her first thoughts were of the ruler candidates of other domains, but she didn't think even ruler candidates in the upper rankings would give Asagi a hard fight in her current state.

"Besides, what did she mean about rendezvousing with senpai...?" she

muttered, sinking into thought.

“Yukina Himeragi,” Shizuri said, breaking her concentration. “We must set aside such talk for now.”

Shizuri was looking up at the sky as it began to be covered by twilight.

A rainbow-colored aurora poured down from the swaying air that covered the entire sky. The Order of the End had recommenced its assault.

Yaze cleared his throat, visibly tense. “Hey, um... Doesn’t it look like an awful lot of acolytes are showing up around here? We gonna be all right?”

Compared to the initial assault, the number of acolytes appearing had increased. Furthermore, it was obvious that many of them were being deployed inside the Tensou Academy Domain. The latter exceeded two hundred with room to spare.

“’Twould seem the acolytes doth prioritize the higher-ranking domains,” Lydianne said.

“The hell...! This difficulty curve is way too intense!” Yaze groaned.

However, Yukina and the others did not have the luxury of voicing complaints—acolytes were pouring into the Tensou Academy school site one after another.

“Reverberate!”

Judging that defeating them one by one would take far too much time, Yukina released silver ritual tablets into the sky. These transformed into birds of prey that assaulted the acolytes immediately after they materialized.

She’d already heard of the acolytes’ weak point from Yume and the others. She thought that the attack power of a *shikigami* was more than sufficient if it was just a matter of breaking their masks.

“...Ugh?!”

But she felt an electrical jolt through the spiritual essence that she used to control the *shikigami*. In the blink of an eye, the acolytes’ counterattacks struck down the *shikigami* Yukina had released.

“What is with these people?! They’re so strong...!” Shizuri shrieked, making Yukina worry.

Shizuri was fighting some sort of beast person. Not only did this person have excellent physical abilities, but they also came armed with huge claws as hard as metal. Its attacks were swift, heavy. Shizuri, a paladin with skills rivaling that of a Sword Shaman, was being utterly overwhelmed.

The robot tank’s machine guns were not able to penetrate a powerful defensive barrier. Yume’s mental attacks weren’t effective, either. Though she tried to employ the horde of demon beasts, the best she could achieve was protecting the two of them. During that time, the number of Order of the End acolytes increased, exposing the ordinary city residents taking shelter inside the school to peril.

“Yazecchi?!” Nagisa cried from the command tent.

An acolyte raised up a scythe aimed at Yaze, who had gone down trying to shield Nagisa.

Yukina tried to rush over to save Yaze, but she suddenly stopped. “...Eh?!”

The acolyte wielding the scythe had not swung it down toward Yaze. Dropping the scythe, it was the acolyte who let out an anguished yell. A dagger seemingly flying out from thin air had stabbed the acolyte in the head.

Noticing the dagger, Ki slumped his shoulders, visibly dejected. “Tch... So the bastard’s already caught up...”

With its mask destroyed, the acolyte dissipated before Nagisa’s and Yaze’s eyes. Afterward, all that remained was the dagger that had pierced the mask—a dagger with a pitch-black blade.

“That dagger... Could it be...?!” Yukina’s eyes snapped wide open when she noticed powerful demonic energy making the air shudder.

When she looked back, she beheld a sky buried in blackness. It was a horde of daggers in vast numbers.

These daggers were no mere weapons. They were masses of demonic energy dense enough to manifest in physical form. They were an Intelligent Weapon—

a vampire's Beast Vassal.

“Dance, Ghoul!”

A male voice filled with dignity reverberated. Guided by his voice, the black daggers poured down toward the acolytes.

All of the acolytes appearing in Yume's domain had their entire bodies ripped apart, dissipating all at once. Their masks were pulverized, not even leaving fragments behind. It was all over in a second.

“That many acolytes in such a short span of time...?!” Shizuri murmured in a daze as she held her crimson long sword at the ready. Even the beast person acolyte she'd had such a hard time against had vanished, its mask broken with ease.

Their duty done, the black daggers vanished as well. Their vampire host had undone the summons.

The man controlling the horde of daggers revealed himself from within the darkness.

He was a tall man with dark skin. He wore a finely tailored old-fashioned coat. He had hair as black as night.

This was Velesh Aradah, chairman of the Imperial Assembly of the Warlord's Empire. As an Old Guard vampire whose pedigree was connected to the First Primogenitor, he was the most powerful of the vampire nobility—the next best thing to a primogenitor.

Ki, still sitting on the edge of the roof, gave Aradah a thumbs-down and booed like a little kid.

“Hey, hey, don't go stealing your ancestor's best scenes. You're just a stick in the mud as always, Aradah.”

Zana stood as if cuddling up to Ki as she smiled teasingly and agreed with her partner. “He really is. Where did he get that from?”

Aradah sighed deeply as he glared at Ki and Zana with a dead-serious look.

“Surely you jest, Your Lordship. Just when I think you've come back to the real world for once, what is the meaning of going out of your way to involve

yourselves in an uproar like this?”

Ki spoke without a single shred of guilt in his voice. “Do you really have to ask? There’s no way I could watch a fun event like this and not stick my finger into it.”

Aradah!’s temples twitched. He was trying to restrain his irritation. “This will be an... No, it has already become an issue of international concern. If Fallgazer and the Chaos Bride learn you have invaded the Fourth Primogenitor’s territory without permission—”

“They won’t say a thing. Well, just watch. It’ll get real interesting in a bit.”

“...Your Lordship?”

Though Ki’s tone was confident, Aradah! did not share it.

Immediately after, an explosion resembling a volcanic eruption ferociously shook all of Itogami Island.

When Yukina and the others reflexively looked back, they saw a giant tornado reaching hundreds of meters into the air. At the center of the whirling was a vampire’s Beast Vassal.

There was a scarlet bicorn shimmering as if it were some kind of mirage, and there was a pitch-black bicorn as well. The collision of the two Beast Vassals scattered explosive gusts in every direction, turning the surrounding buildings to dust.

“Those Beast Vassals?! The Fourth Primogenitor?! Who’s his opponent...?!” Aradah! exclaimed, his expression aghast.

“So it’s begun? Sooner than I thought.” Ki was enjoying this. His expression was that of an innocent child.

“Akatsuki-senpai...!” Yukina strongly gripped her spear.

There was no mistaking that Kojou was fighting The Blood. There was no guarantee whatsoever that Kojou could defeat the boy controlling the same Beast Vassals as the Fourth Primogenitor all by himself.

Yume called out to the hesitant Yukina. “Please, Yukina. Go!”

“Yume?”

“We will protect this domain. So, Yukina, take care of Kojou.” Yume’s determination-filled words and eyes were powerful.

There was no way Yume didn’t feel unease of her own deep down. The Order of the End acolytes continued their assaults, and there was the abnormality occurring at Saikai Academy, too.

Even so, she’d judged that at that moment, sending Yukina off to save Kojou was the right thing to do.

Shizuri stepped forward, grim. “I shall go as well, Yukina Himeragi. If we can defeat this so-called The Blood, we can put an end to this ridiculous war, can we not?”

Her beloved sword, Hauras, had the special characteristic of becoming stronger the more demonic energy it took from the opponent it cut. It was one of the few powerful weapons that could confront the Beast Vassals of The Blood.

Yukina looked back at Shizuri and nodded without a word.

Then, she broke out into a run toward the perilous battleground where violent winds raged.

“Senpai!”

5

The effects of the clash between two powerful Beast Vassals were felt even within the Prison Barrier.

The boundary between the Prison Barrier and the real world strained, ferociously shaking the interior of the fortress. If the combat continued for long, surely maintaining the barrier would eventually become difficult.

Still held fast by black tentacles, Natsuki murmured with visible delight, “This ridiculously enormous demonic energy... Kojou Akatsuki, then?”

“It has nothing to do with you, Natsuki Minamiya. You cannot even move

from this place,” the red-eyed host of the tentacles spat.

Natsuki let out a scornful giggle. “You are mistaken. It’s not that I can’t move. It’s that I do not need to.”

“...Sour grapes, I see.”

“Heh-heh. Keep barking like the beaten dog you are, Octo Girl.”

The pitying expression coming over Natsuki made the red-eyed girl audibly grit her teeth. The tentacles undulated in a creepy fashion as the power with which they squeezed Natsuki increased.

“Please be mindful of your words, Witch of the Void. Even if you cannot yourself be harmed, I have ways of making you suffer. Shall I begin with tearing that homunculus who refuses to die into little pieces?”

“That won’t change the fact you’re a beaten dog. Why is the Order of the End relying on my Prison Barrier? Where did *your* prison run off to? Or is that corrupted flesh the price you paid for violating your pact with your Guardian?”

“Be quiet...!” the red-eyed girl screamed. “What do you know?! You’ve only spent fifteen years in your prison!”

She took several menacing steps toward Natsuki.

Unable to bear the pressure from her tentacles, the tattered ropes snapped and went flying, exposing the entirety of her body. It was beautiful and looked young, like she was in her teenage years—but that only applied to her upper half.

Everything from her hips down branched off into a disgusting mass of intertwined tentacles as if they were a plant’s roots. It resembled an utterly alien life-form.

Her witch’s body had fused with that of the Guardian that had been her devil’s familiar. It had consumed her body as the price for breaking her pact with her devil.

“Three hundred years...! I lived inside my otherworldly prison for three hundred years! Then I realized! The existence of otherworldly prisons is meaningless! Even if they are shut away in eternal darkness, even if birds of

prey peck at their innards while they still live, even if they are bathed in a snake's venom at the bottom of the Earth, criminals cannot be reformed. They do not make criminals vanish from the world, while the crimes only increase!"

"So you ran away? You abandoned your duty as a prison warden?" Natsuki asked in a flat tone of voice.

"You're wrong...! I realized something important! Fear alone... Rule through overpowering fear is the only thing that can keep crime in check. Ugly, pitiful criminals must be immediately, savagely, and cruelly judged."

"So this is the reason you became an acolyte of the Order of the End?" Even when held captive, Natsuki taunted her captor with a vicious grin. "Don't make me laugh. The ugly and pitiful one is you. According to your logic, shouldn't you be first in line to be judged, Merriloé, the Witch of Vengeance? What did you do with the power of a witch you obtained from your pact with a devil?"

"—?!"

"Otherworldly prisons are meaningless? Of course they are. The wardens of those prisons are the criminals upon which weigh the heaviest crimes of all. This eternal idleness is the punishment allotted to us."

"You're wrong... I...!"

Merriloé fiercely shook her head. However, Natsuki did not cease her mockery.

"Ruling by fear prevents criminals from being born, so you worship the Fourth Primogenitor, the very symbol of fear. The Blood has been allowing you to imprint your childish ideals onto him, nothing more. He doesn't genuinely desire any such thing."

"What...do you know...?!"

Merriloé seemed to wring out her voice as she spoke.

"I will not be deceived, Witch of the Void. I will not be seduced by your words."

"I have no reason to deceive you. Even without resorting to roundabout methods like that, driving off the likes of you is a simple matter."

Merriloé's cheeks flushed with anger.

"More sour grapes from you...! What can you do with your Guardian sealed like this?!"

"Is sealing my Guardian enough? This prison belongs to me."

"What?" Merriloé couldn't hide her unease.

A coarse, savage voice echoed throughout the fortress room both girls were in. "Ha-ha! Let's go, Thunder Ax!"

When Merriloé looked back in surprise, she was assaulted by an impact as if she'd been hit by a car.

It felt like she'd been slashed by a giant, invisible ax. Several tentacles were shredded and torn off; the girl herself was sent flying, crashing into a wall.

"Gah...?! Wh...what...?!"

Merriloé fiercely coughed up blood. She didn't know what hit her. She hadn't felt any magical energy whatsoever prior to squarely taking the hit.

"Aaah?! The hell's up with you?! Ya ain't Natsuki Minamiya at all, are ya?! I thought I'd shake 'er up with one shot finally, and what, I got the wrong girl?!"

A small-statured youth with dreadlocks approached the fallen girl.

He wore multilayered clothes employing showy colors and wore knee-length old street-wear jeans. His crude words and actions and the look on his face did a splendid job of making him come off as a blockhead.

His words and gestures didn't make him seem like Natsuki's ally. Yet, as a result of his attack, Merriloé had been sent flying, freeing Natsuki from her tentacles.

"You have done well, oaf."

Natsuki gently landed and shot him a glance.

"Aaagh?!"

The youth crudely bared his teeth at being called an oaf, but a different man stopped him. "Cease, Schtola D."

This was a large-statured man with his entire body enveloped in thick plates.

He had steel-colored skin and ashen hair. On his back, he carried a great sword equal to his considerable height.

As a weapon, Ascalon disregarded balance and ease of use; it was forged for the sole purpose of slicing apart the resilient body of a dragon. And bathed in a dragon's blood, his flesh had been desecrated with the curse of immortality. This was the Great Sinner, Bruté Dumblegraff—descendant of a clan of dragon slayers, and operative for the Western European Church.

"We comprehend the situation, Witch of the Void, but what is it you intend in letting us out of our cells?"

The dragon-slaying mercenary posed the question to Natsuki with a hand still on the hilt of his great sword.

"I am not asking you to fight the Order of the End. Nor do I intend to grant amnesty. This is merely parole on a temporary basis..." Natsuki replied haughtily, "...but only if you desire it."

Schtola D exclaimed with visible irritation, "Whaaa—? Do you think we'd do somethin' just 'cause you asked, you idiot?!"

"Oh, I do. Once you learn their true nature, that is."

That instant, the expressions on Dumblegraff and Schtola changed. What came over Dumblegraff was delight, and what came over Schtola was a look of fury.

"You don't say... Very well... I shall play along with thy scheme."

"Tch... I don't exactly like bein' used like this, but this definitely ain't the time to play with you. Shit!"

When Schtola violently slammed a fist against the wall, a metal manacle appeared on his left wrist. This was the mark of an inmate of the Prison Barrier. Even if they went out into the real world, they would be bound to the Prison Barrier by an invisible chain.

"The time I grant to you is forty-eight hours. Incidentally, don't harm unrelated human beings. Not if you don't want me to drag you back to your

cells before you can fulfill your goals, that is.”

“Understood.”

“Feh!”

A ripple-like swaying in space enveloped the two sorcerous criminals. Then, they vanished from sight. They had been sent from the Prison Barrier in Natsuki’s dream out into the real world.

The only things left were Natsuki, mistress of the barrier, and severed tentacles that wriggled even still, as well as the wounded Merriloé.

She coughed up fresh blood as she stood. “I never imagined that you would go so far as to release criminals from the Prison Barrier...to enable your escape from us...!”

The tentacles that had been severed by Shtola D had largely finished regenerating.

The tentacles, a devil’s familiar, likely granted her regenerative abilities that made her nigh immortal. So long as magical energy remained within their host, they would likely continue to propagate infinitely, unable to be destroyed.

However, Natsuki gazed upon that girl and spoke with utter indifference. “What, you’re still here, beaten dog?”

“Silence! Call me that again, and no matter what The Blood wills, I shall kill you!” Merriloé screeched.

Natsuki snorted. “Just try it, you beaten dog.”

“I’ll kill you!”

Responding to Merriloé’s anger, her tentacles bulged explosively. From there, they became a pitch-black tsunami as they bore down upon the defenseless Natsuki.

The horde of tentacles came to a stop, all thanks to an arm.

It belonged to a golden, clockwork knight, Natsuki’s Guardian.

A savage smile came over Merriloé’s lips. “That can’t stop me—!”

She and Natsuki were both prison wardens. They’d both paid the same price

for their powers as witches. In other words, their Guardians were on equal footing.

However, Natsuki was using the majority of her magical energy to maintain the Prison Barrier. Merriloé had already abandoned her own prison. The price for violating her pact was her Guardian consuming half of her body, but this only increased the magical energy she could freely employ.

In a one-on-one battle, there was no reason for the current Merriloé to lose against Natsuki.

“What?!”

Merriloé was certain of victory when her cheeks stiffened in shock and terror.

When Natsuki’s Guardian appeared, its appearance was not what she had expected.

The beautiful golden armor plates fell away, exposing the Guardian’s innards.

There was no knight within.

Complete darkness from which no light could escape, three eyes from which flames spewed—it was as if the void of the Abyss had been given form.

“Oh dear...” Natsuki let out a languid sigh. “It’s shaken off its bindings.”

Stricken by fear, Merriloé tried to back away, but Natsuki’s Guardian would permit no such thing. The incredible gravitational pull of its darkness caught Merriloé’s tentacles and would not let go.

“I had heard that Rheingold can distort time in this world merely by manifesting... To think that those clockwork mechanisms were to restrain its power...?!” said Merriloé.

“I shall grant your wish, Witch of Vengeance.” Natsuki smiled beautifully, but it struck terror in Merriloé’s heart. The monster attended at Natsuki’s side.

“N...no... Please...stop...”

Merriloé’s lips weakly trembled. The beast of darkness grabbed hold of her tentacles, pulling her in with such overwhelming force, looking as if it were swatting a fly.

The doll-like witch took on an inhuman aura. “Let this ugly, pitiful criminal be savagely and cruelly judged—”

The screams of the Order of the End acolyte echoed through the room of the ancient fortress.

6

His entire body enveloped by raging, tornado-like winds, Kojou landed on artificial ground that threatened to break apart.

He was on the sub-float off Island South, formerly the location of the coast guard runway. To Kojou, it was the place where the Electoral War began.

The sub-float destroyed in the predawn battle had split apart into countless units, floating atop the sea like drift ice.

Of course, there was no sign of human life anywhere, nor were there buildings to worry about breaking. There was no battlefield more suitable for Kojou to really let loose.

The Blood, impressed with Kojou, spoke to his foe. “I see. So your initial attack was to lure me to an unpopulated area.”

Even though he’d supposedly taken an attack from Kojou’s Beast Vassal head-on, he appeared unharmed. He’d summoned his own Beast Vassal to cancel out Kojou’s attack. In other words, The Blood’s Beast Vassals possessed power equal to that of the Fourth Primogenitor.

“Who the hell are you, The Blood?”

Kojou summoned a new Beast Vassal. This was Dabih Crystallus, the mind control Beast Vassal. The Blood countered Kojou’s summons immediately, rendering the Evil Eye useless with his own Beast Vassal.

“Why did you lock me in Onrai Island?”

Kojou summoned yet another Beast Vassal, one with purple flames—Shaula Viola. This, too, was fended off. The Blood’s dark manticore blocked Shaula Viola’s venomous flames.

“Why did you start this Electoral War? Why do you use the same Beast Vassals that I do?!”

Kojou summoned Natra Cinereus. The enormous carapace-covered beast’s silver mist was pushed back by black mist from the blond boy’s own vassal.

“Why do you look so much like Avrora?!”

Kojou summoned yet another Beast Vassal. However, it was in a place impossible for the boy to intercept—beneath the broken ground upon which he stood.

“C’mon over, Cor-Tauri Succinum!”

A torrent of incandescent magma enveloped the entire body of the small-statured boy.

The artificial isle fragment melted, vaporizing the seawater with incredible force. White steam rushed forth, filling the surrounding area.

“You already have the answers to your questions.”

He heard the boy’s voice from the other side of the wall of steam. The voice did not sound pained in any way. The Blood had endured the surprise magma attack.

But how?!

The boy appeared before him.

“I, too, am the Fourth Primogenitor.”

“What?!” Kojou exclaimed.

It was not only The Blood who stood upon the melted artificial isle unit. There was also a man wearing a reptilian bone mask. One of the acolytes of the Order of the End had used his own body as a shield to fend off the torrent of magma.

The robe enveloping him had burned away, and his mask was half-melted as well. However, his body was without a scratch. His skin was like red-bronze scales—dazzling flames gushing from it repelled magma reaching several thousand degrees Celsius.

“Come forth, Primus Succinum.”

“Khh—Mesarthim Adamas!”

Kojou tried to block the pitch-black magma shot back at him with diamond crystals. Fresh blood spurted from Kojou’s shoulder. An attack from an unexpected direction had sliced Kojou’s body and the countless diamond crystals alike.

When the aghast Kojou looked back, he saw another of The Blood’s subordinates. This Order of the End acolyte wore the mask of a bull-like demon beast and wielded a blue, curved blade.

“The other Hauras...!”

Kojou wobbled and went down on one knee.

The power of the Fourth Primogenitor’s Beast Vassals and those of The Blood were equal. However, The Blood had two powerful acolytes. The difference in their strength was clear. Kojou despaired. He saw no hope of victory.

Now that Kojou was backed into a corner before him, The Blood ceased the surprise attacks.

Then, in a gentle tenor, he posed a question.

“Beast Vassals—they are the source of a vampire’s power and his combat abilities in and of themselves. Do you know what they truly are, Kojou Akatsuki?”

“What Beast Vassals...really are...?”

The boy’s abrupt question drew a blank from Kojou. He’d summoned Beast Vassals any number of times up to that point, but he did not know their true nature.

How they were born? Where did they come from? Why could only vampires use them? In all his time living in a Demon Sanctuary, the answers had not reached his ears even once.

To start with, Kojou didn’t know anything about his own Beast Vassals.

“Beasts that serve vampires from within their own blood, summoned beasts from another world—this explanation is not mistaken. However, nor is it the whole truth,” The Blood explained. “Beast Vassals are malice, hatred, curses.

They are the souls of the very gods corrupted and transformed into the forms of demons through Cain the Sinful God's cleansing—cursed beasts born from their wrath and despair. These are a vampire's Beast Vassals."

"They're curses from...the gods..." A chill ran up Kojou's spine.

Why were only vampire primogenitors able to summon such creatures with extraordinary power? Why did the strength of vampire's Beast Vassals diminish with each generation?

If Beast Vassals were really curses, that would explain it. The primogenitors were the vampires that had been cursed the strongest; their children were merely inheriting those curses.

"The Lost Warlord, Fallgazer, the Chaos Bride—they, the three primogenitors, were the first, and became the last, of the bloodlines of the gods so cursed. It was they who were granted the most powerful curse, the most powerful Beast Vassals by the dying Deva race."

"The Devas... The ancient gods..." Kojou murmured.

The ancient gods who once upon a time ruled the world were transformed into demons through the power of Cain's forbidden spell, The Cleansing. Then they were hunted by the humans they should have been ruling.

But if The Blood's words were true, it was the curses of the Devas, exiled from the seat of divinity via The Cleansing, that made the primogenitors from their three demon kings.

"However, even with these curses from the gods, they were unable to defeat the Sinful God." A thin smile came over the boy as he shook his head, seemingly pitying the gods. "That is why the few surviving Devas created an artificial vampire, the fourth of the primogenitors—the World's Mightiest."

"You can't mean..."

"I do. New Beast Vassals were required to create the new primogenitor. A vast quantity of new curses sufficient to call it the World's Mightiest—"

"They used *themselves*?! As living sacrifices?!"

The blond boy nodded without a word. Kojou was horrified.

The ancient gods—the Devas—had perished. They had sacrificed their own lives to create a new primogenitor.

That was how the Fourth Primogenitor, the World's Mightiest Vampire, had come to be. They had created this god-killing weapon to slay Cain.

"The Fourth Primogenitor must be the World's Mightiest Vampire. You have a responsibility to prove that it is so! For the sake of those who became part of the curse themselves in order to create the *World's Mightiest!*"

"So that's your whole reason for this bloodshed...?!"

Kojou was stricken by anger so ferocious that he felt his mind drifting away.

Proving that the Fourth Primogenitor was the World's Mightiest Vampire—that was The Blood's objective. That was the sole reason for his actions.

The same went for locking Kojou inside Onrai Island and making him experience the deaths of his comrades over and over.

The same went for instigating the Electoral War and demanding that Kojou announce himself.

He was asserting that all of this was to implement the curse of the gods who had perished in ancient times.

"We are not your enemy. The Fourth Primogenitor will become the ruler of this world. We, the Order of the End, exist for this very purpose."

"Ruler of the whole world... Huh? There's no way a ruckus on Itogami Island is big enough to cause somethin' like that, dammit!" Kojou spat. "Don't mess with me."

"No. There is a way." The boy narrowed his eyes in delight. "Have you forgotten? Itogami Island is the altar for The Cleansing, the greatest legacy of the Sinful God. Should there be a legal way to obtain it, it is unthinkable that the other primogenitors will fail to mobilize."

"A...legal way to take Itogami Island? That's the point of all this?!"

Kojou couldn't help feeling overwhelmed by this.

According to logic, the ruler candidate with a monopoly on all the domains

would become the owner of Itogami Island, sorcerous device for The Cleansing. But merely obtaining Itogami Island didn't mean you could use it. In the first place, virtually none of the current ruler candidates would have any idea what The Cleansing actually was.

Kojou could not make his worries disappear, though. He had the indelible, terrible sense that he'd overlooked something, some kind of crucial factor.

"My true name is Kenon. Number Zero of the Kaleid Bloods."

The boy slowly opened his lidded eyes.

He beheld Kojou with eyes that blazed like azure flames.

These were, without a shred of doubt, the same eyes as Avrora, the Twelfth. They were the eyes of the artificial vampires created by the Devas.

"I am the prototype of the Fourth Primogenitor, and I am your shadow. Furthermore, I am the proxy for the curse of the gods. With all of the power granted unto me, I shall deliver you the world."

"Before you do that, I'll send you flying and end the Electoral War!" Kojou howled, concealing his fierce internal unrest.

If The Blood was related to Avrora, that was all the more reason to put a stop to his vile deeds. That was Kojou's duty as the one who'd inherited her power.

"It is futile."

Pitch-black mist gushed out from all over the boy's—Kenon's—body. This mist, infused with immense demonic energy, changed into the form of an enormous, phantasmal beast. It was a mermaid of ice, or perhaps a siren, spreading forth transparent wings.

"I am stronger than you, for you are incomplete. Come forth, Primus Glacies."

"That Beast Vassal—?!!"

Vast cold gushing out from the pitch-black monstrous bird assaulted Kojou. The surface of the sea surrounding the sub-float, and the air above it, froze in a split second, coming to a halt.

Kojou had no way to offset this cold, for the monstrous raptor of ice was the

prototype for the Fourth Primogenitor's eleventh Beast Vassal—employing the attacks of the final Beast Vassal that Kojou had yet to obtain.

“Shit...!”

Kojou felt his own mind turning into white mist.

A vampire primogenitor was immortal, but completely freezing him would still render him immobile. The Blood intended to freeze Kojou and advance the Electoral War further during that time.

But even though he understood this, Kojou couldn't stop it. He'd already lost his vision and all feeling in his limbs. Even his mind felt distant.

With what little cognition he still had, he got the feeling he heard a soothing voice.

He thought he saw the dazzling radiance of spiritual energy...

“I, Maiden of the Lion, Sword Shaman of the High God, beseech thee—”

“?!”

Kenon's elegant expression twitched.

Leaping into Kojou's vision was a small girl wielding a silver spear.

“O purifying light, O divine wolf of the snowdrift, by your steel divine will, strike down the devils before me!”

A pale beam of light emitted by the girl's spear sliced through the monstrous raptor.

As his whole body regained its freedom, Kojou let out a ferocious cough.

“Himeragi!”

“Are you all right, senpai?”

Yukina kept her silver spear thrust forward as she turned a small smile of relief toward him.

When she saw his bloodied shoulder, her eyes quietly scrutinized him.

“Truly, every single time I take my eyes off you for but a few brief moments, you always, always get hurt like this... Just what in the world were you

thinking?!”

“What?! Uh, this isn’t really the time to say that stuff...”

“Please save your quarrel for after our predicament!” Shizuri Kasugaya’s painful words came alongside the high-pitched sound of metal clashing with metal.

Shizuri’s crimson long sword was batted downward by the same blue, curved blade that had previously pierced Kojou’s shoulder from behind.

“Cas?! What are you even doing here...?!”

“Obviously, I have come to save you! Goodness, you are such a handful!”

With the brute force of an ogre, Shizuri sent the blade-wielding acolyte flying.

However, the acolyte regained its balance in midair and landed with perfect calm.

“Watch out, The Blood uses the same Beast Vassals as the Fourth Primogenitor. Also, that macho bastard can shrug off bein’ in the middle of lava,” Kojou warned, shooting a glance at the acolyte beside The Blood.

“I understand... From his aura, I can tell this is no normal person.”

“That blue blade...”

Shizuri trained her own sword toward the other acolyte.

That instant, Kojou heard a low, muffled voice, filled with resentment that seemed to echo from the deepest recesses of the Earth.

The voice hailed from the blade-wielding acolyte. A woman’s voice filled with anger echoed from under the bull skull mask.

“I have found you...Hauras!”

“Huh?!”

Shizuri was a little unnerved by the anger suddenly directed toward her.

The blade-wielding acolyte roared and came in slicing. The slicing attack had incredible force. If it were Kojou, there was no doubt he could have done nothing to prevent being split in two.

“Wh-what is with you?!”

Shizuri just barely managed to block the acolyte’s attack. The captivating serrations of the crimson blade gave off sparks as the blue, curved blade clashed with it.

“Silence, descendant of the betrayer!”

“Who betrayed what exactly?!”

The acolyte’s slashing attacks assaulted Shizuri without pause, which Shizuri continued to defend.

Then, the moment it seemed an attack had been completely blocked, the curved, blue blade emitted a flash of light.

Shizuri’s expression contorted in surprise; this sword was able to shoot out its accumulated demonic energy in one lethal attack, just like her own Hauras.

“Cas?!” Kojou yelled, but a huge explosion muffled his voice.

That same attack was so brutal, it hollowed out the sub-float remnants to the tune of tens of meters across.

However, Shizuri endured it. She’d instantly expelled demonic energy from Hauras to fend off the blue blade’s attack. Her clothes were in tatters, but Shizuri herself was largely unscathed. Her tenacity as an ogre was on full display.

“Senpai!”

Just when Kojou let out a sigh of relief, Yukina violently thrust him aside.

Incandescent flames raced through the place where Kojou had stood only a moment before. The other acolyte escorting Kenon had spewed explosive flames through his mask.

“What’s with this flame...?!”

“Please be careful. This attack is not magic!”

Yukina shouted to the bewildered Kojou.

If the flames were not magic, that meant Yukina could not nullify them with Snowdrift Wolf. That was probably why Kojou hadn’t sensed the flames before

they'd been shot out.

The mask the acolyte wore melted and fell, burned by the flames he himself had spewed. Taking this as his cue, the acolyte altered form.

The flesh that had been human-shaped transformed into that of a reptile crawling on all fours. His already massive frame swelled to a full ten times its previous size, and his head transformed into something more contorted.

Red-bronze scales covered the whole of his body. Enormous wings spread from his back. He had a long, serpentine tail and razor-sharp fangs. He had a mane, and long horns jutted from his forehead.

"I cannot believe it. That is a...!"

Yukina exclaimed as she looked at the transformed acolyte.

Kojou and the others knew of a species capable of such transformations.

These were beings boasting great intellect and demonic energy, at the pinnacle of Demonkind in a different sense from vampires—

"A dragon?!"

Now completely transformed into a dragon, the acolyte spewed flames once more.

Kojou picked Yukina up and leaped. It was impossible for normal human speed to evade the wide sweep of a dragon's breath.

Shizuri and her opponent continued fighting in a place just beyond the flames' reach. Then a sudden change befell the pair of closely matched opponents.

Shizuri, forced onto the defensive by her opponent's overwhelming anger, abruptly went on the attack, seemingly fed up with it all.

"Why you, cut it out already—!"

Thud! went the dull sound that echoed between Shizuri and the acolyte. Judging that sword fighting wasn't getting the job done, Shizuri smashed her own forehead into her opponent's.

"Ghh..."

The acolyte pressed upon her own forehead as she retreated.

Shizuri looked nothing but graceful to the eyes, so the acolyte naturally had never expected Shizuri to choose a method of attack as crude and barbaric as a headbutt. Taking the hit squarely had apparently resulted in more damage than she'd counted on.

"Ow, ow...!" Shizuri also pressed her forehead as tears welled at the corners of her eyes.

After a moment, Shizuri abruptly opened her eyes wide in surprise. She'd noticed the bare face poking out from under the broken mask.

"Y-you're...!"

Shizuri tried to continue to say something, but her words never made it into her voice. Her mask lost, the blade-wielding acolyte retreated all the way to The Blood's side.

When Shizuri moved to make a follow-up attack, the dragon assaulted her with fire to drive her back.

Shizuri used a demonic energy release from Hauras to intercept the flames and retreated. She somehow managed to regain her balance and landed at Kojou's side.

The freshly gathered trio of Kojou and the others ended up facing off against The Blood's side. However, in contrast to the aggressive posture from Kojou, Kenon's face revealed no hostile intent.

He looked up at the sky of Itogami Island with mild surprise. It was a night sky without even a single cloud.

Yukina blinked, surprised. "The warping of space...has vanished?"

The rainbow-colored swaying that had covered Itogami Island's upper sky had dissipated. Of course, this meant that the Order of the End's attacks had ceased.

This event was wholly unexpected as far as The Blood was concerned. What came over his lips was a pained smile that resembled a resigned expression.

"So Merriloé was unable to restrain her. I should have expected as much of the Witch of the Void." Kenon sighed. "However, it would seem that we are not

too late. We shall retreat.”

“Understood.”

The dragon let the boy aboard one of its front claws. The blade-wielding acolyte climbed upon the dragon’s back, glaring at Shizuri.

“Daughter of the Castiellas... Next time, I shall kill you and take back our sword.”

“Wh-what self-serving nonsense are you—?!”

Shizuri’s shout was impeded by the beating of the dragon’s wings. Spewing flames from its mouth for propulsion, the dragon soared high into the sky in the span of a blink.

“Like hell I’ll let you go!”

Kojou turned his right hand toward the receding dragon. He was trying to shoot the dragon down with a Beast Vassal.

“No, senpai, you mustn’t!”

Yukina stopped Kojou a moment short. It was not that she feared that The Blood would counterattack. It was because she’d noticed the aura of a new Beast Vassal, seemingly appearing to exploit the opening in Kojou’s defenses.

The stars dotting the sky had at some point vanished. In their place, the sky was covered with an enormous black storm cloud with dazzling thunderbolts. This was the new Beast Vassal.

Countless bolts of lightning released by the thundercloud punched through various sub-float fragments floating on the surface of the sea.

This was a warning shot.

Without a word, the host of the lightning Beast Vassal was ordering Kojou and the others to depart. The proof of this was that only the unit Kojou and the girls were standing on had been left to float unscathed.

“That Beast Vassal...?! ”

Kojou looked up at the sky, shaking his head in a daze.

He knew the true nature of the giant thundercloud Beast Vassal covering the

night sky.

The overwhelming might rivaling a natural disaster came from a Beast Vassal belonging to a vampire primogenitor.

“What are you doing...? ...Giada!”

Standing on the arch of the wrecked connecting bridge linked to Island South was a beautiful woman with jade-colored eyes.

The Third Primogenitor, the Chaos Bride, looked down upon the befuddled Kojou with a wild smile.





OUTRO

A squadron of gray aircraft carrying cargo landed on Itogami Island. Yume Eguchi bit her lip as she looked up at what seemed like an ominous flock of night crows.

From the headquarters on the roof of Tensou Academy, Yaze climbed the back of the robot tank. “Military cargo planes?! From which country?”

Lydianne was in her pilot suit as she furiously operated a control panel inside her cockpit, ordering her AI to identify based on the target data acquired. “This military identification code... Good heavens! The Fallen Dynasty?! Bogey Number Six is a VC-17 Gray Bayadh, personal aircraft of the Second Primogenitor, Fallgazer—King Aswadguhl Aziz.”

Ki Juranbarada, who’d been napping on pipe chairs lined up in a row, leaped to his feet when he heard Lydianne’s voice. “...So that hermit prick finally showed up. Sure made me wait awhile.” His eyes sparkled as he glared at the cargo planes overhead. His reaction was like that of an elementary schooler eagerly awaiting the return of an old playmate.

“Your Lordship...? What do you mean? Why has the fallen king come to this island...?” Aradahl asked, serious.

Don’t you get it? said the exasperated face with which Ki looked back at Aradahl. “It’s obvious. It’s to join in. To enter Itogami Island’s Electoral War.”

“You...cannot be serious...!”

“Velesh, drop the Imperial Knights. You did bring them, didn’t you?”

Aradahl was trembling as he realized the gravity of the situation in contrast to Ki’s laid-back air. The Imperial Knights under Aradahl’s command were the elite unit of the Warlord’s Empire, directly under the command of its Imperial Parliament. Composed of handpicked demons powerful even by regular army standards, they were granted top-level equipment. If they felt like it, they were

strong enough to destroy not only Itogami Island but the Japanese mainland itself.

However, even the Imperial Knights were not the most powerful unit the Warlord's Empire had to offer.

"Your Lordship, what of the Imperial Guards—the Warlord's Army?" Aradahl asked.

The Warlord's Army in service to the First Primogenitor was Ki's self-created unit, assembled as his personal subordinates. Composed not only of vampires but also beast people, witches, and humans—as well as numerous demons of unknown natures—the scope and details of their activities were completely unknown. The one certainty was that it was the most frightening unit of all. They were the symbol of the First Primogenitor's power—the Lost Warlord's trump card.

Ki, leader of that fearsome group, smiled impetuously in response to Aradahl's question. Then, as if it was some kind of cue, he snapped his fingers.

"They've been here for *quite a long time*."

"...What?!"

Before Ki's words were even finished, multiple figures appeared behind Aradahl.

There was no sense that they'd teleported. They'd suddenly appeared as if the darkness of night had taken humanoid form.

They weren't on the roof of Tensou Academy only, either. At the large-scale commercial facility known as Thetis Mall and the high-class parking facility in the upscale part of town—similar figures appeared all over Island West.

The spectacle declared one thing with a bang—Island West was under the First Primogenitor's rule.

Ki ignored the speechless, immobile Aradahl and shifted his gaze toward the coast. "Seems like the old hag with too much makeup on managed to land in one piece."

The sky of Island South was covered by a black cloud. A black-dyed fleet of

warships had appeared off the coast. It was a fleet of armored submersible aircraft carriers belonging to the Third Primogenitor, the Chaos Bride.

“So, li'l ruler...” Walking in front of the shaken Yume, Ki kneeled down so that he was at eye level. He respectfully offered his right hand, like a prince inviting a town girl to a dance. “As Ki Juranbarada, ruler of the Warlord’s Empire, I request an alliance with you.”

“An...alliance...?” Yume’s eyes opened big and wide as she stared at Ki.

Taking her small hand, Ki winked an eye with a guileless look.

“For the time being, we’ll take over Island West and guarantee the safety of the citizens. No one’ll lay a hand on them, not the Order of the End, not the other primogenitors. So how about it?”



They moved at a speed of some eight hundred kilometers per hour as violent winds rolled outside the window with a roar.

Sayaka Kirasaka remained seated in the cargo compartment of the plane, narrowing her eyes at a tiny monitor on a military-grade communications device.

On the monitor was a beautiful silver-haired, blue-eyed girl—La Folia Rihavein, princess of the kingdom of Aldegia.

“This is a map of the current array of forces on Itogami Island according to our operatives on the ground.” La Folia shared a map of the island, divided into four large sections. *“Island East is under military occupation by the Fallen Dynasty, West by the Warlord’s Empire, and South by the Chaos Zone. Currently, they are countering the Order of the End acolytes, and no casualties among the citizenry have been confirmed. However, the Order of the End is still occupying Keystone Gate.”*

Sayaka felt dizzy as she listened to La Folia’s explanation.

The rulers of every Dominion that existed on Earth—all of the vampire primogenitors—were gathered on that tiny island. It was a disastrous situation. Until a few hours ago, no one would have predicted this. It wouldn’t be strange

for a global war to break out, putting even the war of the primogenitors to shame. Sayaka couldn't wrap her head around this emergency.

"Is Kojou Akatsuki safe?" she asked, maintaining her composure anyway.

La Folia shook her head slightly. *"The Fourth Primogenitor's whereabouts are unknown. However, just prior to sunset, a report came in confirming a clash between two primogenitor-class Beast Vassals underground in Island North."*

"Island North... Hmm."

Sayaka firmly pursed her lips. If the other three primogenitors had the west, east, and south floats locked down, the chances the Fourth Primogenitor was in Island North were high. Yukina was probably there with him.

"I am very sorry that I cannot do more than this to assist at such an amusi... such a terrible time, Sayaka. I cannot dispatch Aldegian Knights to Itogami Island. They are not qualified to participate in the Electoral War."

La Folia lowered her eyes. By the end, she really sounded dismayed from the bottom of her heart.

From Sayaka's perspective, though, she had one good piece of news. With Itogami Island in utter chaos, having that black-hearted, scheming princess further involved would make the situation truly unsalvageable.

"No, it is quite enough that you are transporting me as far as Itogami Island," Sayaka said. "Stopping sorcerous terrorism on Itogami Island is the Lion King Agency's job, after all."

Sayaka looked down at her own outfit.

She was wearing a thick pressure suit, reminiscent of an astronaut's, as well as an oxygen mask. On top of that, she had a large backpack. La Folia's subordinates had forced her to wear it when loading her into the cargo plane's hold.

"Um, Princess... Incidentally, what is this equipment for? Why a pressure suit? And what is this baggage on my back?"

"It is equipment for a HALO drop."

"Halo...drop?" Sayaka tilted her head over the unfamiliar term.

La Folia grinned. *“It means High Altitude, Low Opening. It is a parachute drop method developed for infiltrating enemy territory during wartime. The cargo bay hatch will open at an altitude of ten thousand meters above Itogami Island. At that time, please engage in free fall until an altitude of three hundred meters.”*

“Pa...parachute?!”

Sayaka’s eyes bulged as she looked at the pack on her back. The sleek, refined design made her fail to realize it, but when she looked harder, it couldn’t be anything but a parachute.

“F-free-fall from ten thousand meters—you mean I have to jump out from this aircraft?!”

“Well, you can hardly land at Itogami Island’s airport facility now that the Fallen Dynasty has occupied it.”

La Folia spoke with a serene air. However, her blue eyes were narrowed in a teasing fashion.

Sayaka began sweating bullets. She might have been a Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency, an expert in curses and assassination, but parachute drops were beyond her forte.

“P-p-please wait. It is not that I am afraid of heights, but ten thousand meters is a little...”

“Don’t worry. I went ahead and made midair posture control and the opening of the parachute automatic.”

“Princess?! Princess, you’re definitely doing this for your own amusement, aren’t you?!” La Folia twitched.

La Folia elegantly waved a hand at her. *“Oh my, it would seem you are at the drop point. Well then, Sayaka, I pray for your good fortune in battle.”*

Thud. A dull sound echoed as the rear hatch of the cargo plane opened. Frigid air from an altitude of ten thousand meters blew into the plane, washing over Sayaka’s slender physique.

What she saw below was total darkness. There was only the surface of the

night ocean.

“W-wait! I’m not emotionally prepared for...! N-nooooooooooooo! Save me, Yukina! Yukinaaaa!”

Sayaka dropped, seemingly hurled out of the completely open hatch.

The last of her screams vanished, heard by no one as they were absorbed by the night sky.



Shio Hikawa abruptly stared at the night sky above her head.

She was on a small, fan-shaped sub-float some eighteen kilometers removed from Itogami Island; it was the coast of Blue Elysium.

Since it was nothing but a resort facility, the artificial isle had not been included in the Electoral War, nor had it come under assault by acolytes of the Order of the End. Due to the suspension of ferry service, some of the tourists were inconvenienced from being unable to return home, but things had been largely peaceful beyond that.

Shio stood upon that sub-float’s sandy coast and twisted her neck in curiosity.

Yui Haba turned to her. “Shio? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Shio curtly shook her head. “It’s my mind playing tricks. I thought I heard Kirasaka screaming.”

“Oh reeeally?” Yui smiled with a suggestive leer. She no doubt found it amusing that Shio, who normally bickered with Sayaka, had the girl on her mind.

“It’s really not as if I’m worried about her, okay?” Shio insisted.

Yui’s smile widened. She was even more amused than before.

“It’s all right. I’ll keep this secret from Kirasaka.”

“I said I’m not worried about her!”

“Yeah...” Yui’s expression tightened. “It’s Kojou and Yukii we should be worried about, huh.” She gave the hilt of the long sword she clutched against

her chest a strong squeeze.

Shio made a weighty nod of her own.

Though they were removed from Itogami Island proper, they had heard about the current situation through various media. In particular, information from Yukari Endou through her own familiar had proven swift and accurate.

They knew that Koyomi Shizuka of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency had been injured, that Kojou Akatsuki had confronted The Blood, and that his whereabouts thereafter were unknown. Naturally, they also knew the current state of Itogami Island.

“Who would have thought the other primogenitors would march on Itogami Island?” Yuiiri muttered.

“Even the Lion King Agency can’t lift a finger in this situation...” Shio sighed.

As a result of the three primogenitors joining the Order of the End’s Electoral War, the Japanese government had been left without an opportune moment to intervene. It was unable to dispatch more Attack Mages from the Lion King Agency; the same surely went for the Bureau of Astrology and Federal Attack Mages from other branches.

Excluding Yukina, permanently stationed as the Fourth Primogenitor’s observer, Shio and Yuiiri were the only Lion King Agency Attack Mages on Itogami Island. Shio and Yuiiri had used their vacation time to come to Blue Elysium’s Demon Beast Park to see Glenda and have fun.

Being off duty to begin with, Shio and Yuiiri were rather short on gear. Nor were they confident that they could oppose the Order of the End and vampire primogenitors. But given that there were no other Attack Mages able to make a move, they had no choice but to go save Kojou and Yukina themselves.

Besides, Shio and Yuiiri weren’t the only ones who wanted to be of assistance to Kojou and Yukina both.

“Glenda, how about it? Think you can manage?” Yuiiri asked the girl with steel-colored hair in shallow water as the waves lapped against her.

“Dah!” Lifting her head, Glenda affirmed with a powerful tone.

Glenda's existence was one reason why Yuiri and Shio had decided to go to Itogami Island. The dragon girl was able to fly as far as Itogami Island proper with the two of them on her back.

A dragon able to glide without making a sound or using demonic energy could probably slip past the Order of the End and the primogenitors' surveillance to infiltrate Itogami Island.

Of course, deep down Shio and Yuiri didn't want to involve Glenda in such dangerous acts, but she wanted to be there.

Additionally, there was one more person they were taking with them, and it was someone whom Shio and Yuiri were meeting for the first time. However, they'd known her name from long before. They knew little about her beyond her name and that her power was necessary for Kojou Akatsuki's victory over The Blood.

That girl was hiding behind Glenda's back, watching the approaching waves in surprise and fright. She wore a men's white parka over her diminutive frame, concealing her face under its deep hood.

A few short tufts of hair spilled out from the hood's neck. It was pale blond hair that seemed to change color depending on the angle you viewed it, almost like a rainbow.

"You're all set? We're all going to ride Glenda," Yuiri said. "There will be some shaking, so try to hold on tight."

The girl tensely lifted her face and looked at Yuiri. Her big blue eyes showed how scared she was. Even so, she awkwardly nodded, wringing out all the courage she could muster as she spoke with a serene voice.

"I—I permit it."

Afterword

There have been so many disasters happening everywhere. Allow me to express my sympathy for all of you who have been hurt in any way. Actually, I wrote this afterword in the middle of a strong typhoon while I was afraid the power might go out at any moment. Having your house shake like that is pretty darn scary.

When it comes to practical issues and emergencies with lives on the line, there isn't a whole lot an author can do, but I think it's good to make things that give us both some space from reality temporarily and the courage to face adversity.

Everyone, I pray that you may spend time with your minds at ease.

So there you have it, *Strike the Blood*, Vol. 19 has reached stores.

It's been a while, but we finally have a mainline volume (not a side story of any kind). This episode, I knew that it'd be a story involving an awful lot of characters, so I gave up on completing it in a single volume at a fairly early stage (it just couldn't be done). Even so, I felt like I just didn't have enough pages for everything I wanted to write about the actions of people in the shadows all off on their own. Actually, I could fill a whole volume with what Yume and Shizuri were up to before Kojou and company returned home, but after a bit of thought, I tearfully gave up, knowing that if I did that, this story would simply never end. So I'd be grateful if everyone takes this as a license to mentally fill in the blanks in the manner most appropriate.

Since this story isn't over, there are a lot of details I can't touch on here in the afterword, but I plan to get the rest out to you as soon as possible. I ask for your best regards going forward.

Just the other day, the production of a third *Strike the Blood* OVA series was

announced. It's expected to begin with Volume 13's the Roses of Tartarus arc.

That the anime has been able to continue this long and has continued to be such a high-quality production is thanks to all of the staff and cast, and even more so because you're cheering us on. I know I say this all the time, but thank you very much.

I let myself into every scenario planning meeting, too, but having *Strike the Blood* reproduced by staff so familiar with the work lets me move forward with a profound sense of relief. I feel like the works they'll make will no doubt satisfy everyone. I'm looking forward to it!

Additionally, Ryuryu Akari-sensei is serializing *Strike the Blood: This is Saikai Academy Middle School* in *Dengeki Bunko Magazine*. It is a four-panel comic featuring the middle school trio of Yukina, Nagisa, and Kanon in their daily lives. It's fun and so adorable! It's so cute, you'll feel it curing all the ills in your life. It'd be great if you checked this out, too!

To Manyako, the novel illustrator, you've really been a huge help once again. I had goose bumps the instant I saw your rough sketch of the cover illustration for this volume. It's just that cool.

And to everyone involved in the production and distribution of this book, allow me to thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Of course, my greatest thanks of all goes to all of you who have read this book.

I hope to see you again next volume.

Gakuto Mikumo

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